

God is for life, not just for Christmas

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[0 : 0 0] the sixth and final reading can be found inside your service sheet um it is taken from matthew's gospel and in this reading matthew tells us about the experience of joseph as he hears the unsettling news of mary's pregnancy matthew chapter 1 beginning at verse 18 this is how the birth of jesus the messiah came about his mother mary was pledged to be married to joseph before they came together she was found to be pregnant through the holy spirit 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 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 of 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 all this took place to fulfill what the lord has said through the prophet the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and they will call him emmanuel which means god with us when joseph woke up he did what the lord the angel of the lord had commanded him and took mary home as his wife but he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son and he gave him the name jesus thanks so much pepe and it's uh great to see you all this evening and uh a joy to be singing in this space lit up as it is a little bit triggering for me to hear about rebecca's uh candles real candles on the christmas tree uh my in-laws are into that as well and uh every so often a branch will catch fire and you're sort of dashing off to the kitchen to get a bucket of water and uh they're not bothered at all they quite like the smell of the burning pine adds to the aroma uh well let's pray and ask for god's help as we think about this passage from matthew father we thank you that you're a god who speaks to us would you help us to hear afresh uh the message of christmas the good news of the birth of jesus and we pray that the holy spirit would impress it upon our hearts and help us to respond rightly to it we ask in jesus name amen well what do you want for christmas a bit of a dangerous question to ask depending on who you're asking now i i really should have learnt my lesson by now not to ask top of the wish list for my wife for my daughter and for my son this year and every year is a puppy man's best friend specifically a miniature dashound or daxound however you want to pronounce it a miniature sausage dog uh perish the thought super cute super sweet little face big floppy ears uh rumpled skin around its little leggies uh that's what they see happiness what i see unnecessary unnecessary expense an insatiable drain on our resources the cost of getting it in the first place the cost of feeding it admittedly i imagine this is probably a little bit less for this breed than for others

uh but there's vet bills and insurance bills uh there's kenneling fees and whatever else there may be i've got a friend who who had to stump up for a dog psychologist but if you know me well you'll know that i've been under serious pressure considerable sustained pressure to get a sausage dog and my children even uh pray about it they've been put up to that by us i'm pretty sure that's a form of spiritual abuse but it doesn't help that my brothers both of them have recently got uh little puppies basil and brody uh cheers bros and uh so i have my children saying my cousins have dogs why can't we get one doesn't help that my in-laws have literally just got a new puppy uh poirot to replace the previous one uh philip who died of old age so i get sent photos uh like this and that expression a combination of of shameless begging tinged with a little bit of disappointment that she's married to the the christmas canine scrooge or grinch well i've been under considerable pressure but so far i've resisted i've remained unmoved and it's thanks in no small part to our slogan that's been about for as long as i've been alive a dog is for life not just for christmas it's a simple message uh easy to remember very effective and it's the language of commitment getting a dog is life changing if you're not ready for that change in your life don't get a dog a dog is for life not just for christmas so now that i've got that off my chest about the puppies what about jesus because if you think that getting a dog is life changing then jesus is going to be radically more so so let's take another look at our

passage verse 18 joseph's world has been just turned upside down he's received this life changing news that his fiance mary is pregnant and he knows for certain he knows it's not his child it can't possibly be his he's not naive he's not gullible he knows about the birds and the bees he knows how these things work and so he assumes quite reasonably that she's having a baby with some other guy and because he's a decent guy verse 19 and didn't want to expose her to public disgrace he's had it in mind to break it off quietly he's not the kind of guy he's going to go about bad mouthing calling her bad names or things like that he's not going to splash her across social media so do you know what this means and I love the fact that joseph is in the bible here because at this point in time he must be the ultimate skeptic he must be the world's biggest skeptic about jesus just put yourself in his shoes let's face it if you're joseph you're going to take some convincing it's going to take something pretty big to change your mindset about this baby and it does take something quite extraordinary an angel a spiritual messenger from god is sent and appears to him in a dream and the angel tells them don't be afraid it's okay god's behind this and in the in the names that the baby is given jesus and immanuel and the names meanings we learn two things about jesus who he is something about who he is

and something about what he's here for what he's come to do and we're going to think about those two things in time under a couple of headings now bear with me because with just a little tweak and a switching of letters we can get the slogan to just about work for our passage helpful but dog is an anagram of god of course god is for life not just for christmas and so splitting that in two we've got our two headings god is for life and god is not just for christmas so firstly then god is for life have you ever wondered what's the point of christmas why did god send his son jesus the clue is in the name let's look again at verse 20 an angel of the lord appeared to joseph in a dream and said don't be afraid this is god's doing mary will give birth to a son and you are to give him the name jesus see if it was left up to joseph he might have named him fred or george or bill or tom but god's not taking any chances here this is god's name choice the name jesus is the greek form of the hebrew yeshua joshua which means roughly the lord saves the lord rescues and that's what god is all about that's what he's in the business of rescuing his people he's a god who specializes in that and it's a perfectly fitting name because that's exactly what jesus has come to do rescue his people now the key thing here the key thing for us to get our heads around for us to grasp is what it is jesus has come to rescue us from what he's come to save us from jesus came to save us from our sins so god's people in jesus day were expecting a savior a messiah to save them from roman oppression occupation but jesus came to save us from something far more profound something far more profound than that our sinfulness choosing to do things our own way over god's way he came to save us from the penalty of sin that we'll all face judgment the reality of being cut off from god's goodness forever and he came to save us not only from the penalty of sin but from the power of sin the grip that sin has on our lives and so one writer puts it like this if our greatest need had been for information god would have sent us an educator if our greatest need had been for technology god would have sent us a scientist if our greatest need had been for money he'd have sent us an economist if our greatest need had been for pleasure he'd have sent us an entertainer but our greatest need is forgiveness that's our greatest need and so God sent us a savior.

That's what Jesus has come to achieve for us. We cannot do that ourselves. We cannot save ourselves, not from sin. And the cost of it is Jesus' life.

Jesus fulfilled that promise. Jesus lived up to his name when he took our place and died on the cross. Well, a few days before Christmas in 1991, a 19-year-old Robin Farmer returned home to Northern Ireland after his first time at Stirling University.

[11 : 48] And he was working in his family shop in County Tyrone when a terrorist gunman burst in and stuck a gun in his dad's face. Well, Robin instinctively dived in front of his dad and took the hits.

He took the bullets. He died shortly after. His courageous sacrifice reflects something of the sacrifice of what Jesus came to do for us.

As Robin's father can say, my son died for me. So we can say, if we're trusting in Jesus, God's son died for us.

That's how much Jesus loves us. That's why he came. There's no other way that he could have saved us or made us right with God. Is this just a get-out-of-jail-free card for us?

Something to help us to avoid judgment when we die? No. The second name, Emmanuel, shows us that our relationship to God is very real to us now for many of us here who are Christians.

[12:57] So that leads us on to our second point. God is not just for Christmas. So let's look at verse 22 again. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said centuries earlier through the prophet Isaiah, that a virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and he would be called Emmanuel, God with us.

In other words, Isaiah had written about this well in advance, that a young woman with no earthly way of getting pregnant would give birth to a heavenly child.

The name means that Jesus is God himself. The eternal son of God became a man to accomplish our salvation. Jesus is God living in our world.

He's walking through the pages of human history. God is restoring us to relationship with him. God restoring sinners to himself through the Lord Jesus.

Jesus is God living in our world. Well, we were getting into the festive spirit yesterday afternoon in our household watching a Christmas film. I couldn't persuade our kids to watch *It's a Wonderful Life*.

[14:16] I do try every year. What's happened to all the colors, daddy? So instead, we watched another Christmas classic, *Home Alone*. And there's that bit in the beginning where Kevin's sent upstairs in a tantrum and a bit of a strop telling his mom, everyone in this family hates me.

And his mom replies, then maybe you should ask Santa for a new family. And I was reminded that you need to be careful what you wish for.

And he goes off on one. I don't want a new family. I don't want any family. Families suck. I don't want to see you again for the rest of my whole life. And of course, he wakes up in the morning and has his wish granted.

He finds he's got what he asked for. So right back at the beginning of the Bible in a passage that we read, Adam and Eve were like children to God. And they lived every day with God in the Garden of Eden until they chose their way over God's way.

And then God gave them the terrible thing that they asked for, to go away from God. So be careful what you wish for.

[15:24] God sent them out of the garden and away from him. But now here in Jesus' birth, the God who rescues us is also the God who restores us to God's family, who reconciles us to relationship with him.

You know this name, Emmanuel, only appears once in Matthew's Gospel. But the idea of it, the idea of Emmanuel is right at the very end of Matthew's Gospel too.

There's a verse right at the end that brings us back to the idea of Emmanuel. Jesus instructs his followers to go into the world and make disciples of all nations.

And then he concludes with these words. And surely I am with you. Always. Not just for Christmas. Always. To the very end of the age. In other words, Matthew structures his whole Gospel. He brackets it this way to highlight the importance of this name, Emmanuel.

[16:31] So God's presence in the person of Jesus is promised at the beginning and at the end of the Gospel. And this is worth us thinking about.

Because if it's true that God continues to be with us, then that transforms all the experiences of the believer's life. God is with you in your joy.

God is with you in your sorrow. God is with you and with you in every trial. So for some of us here this evening, no doubt that's something you really need to hear.

God is with you. And because behind all the glitter and the bubbles there's heartache and sorrow and disappointment for some.

And some of you are really struggling this Christmas. Some of you may be feeling that now or some of you may know others who are. You don't need to forget the year that's passed.

[17:37] God wants you to know that when he says Jesus is Emmanuel, God with you. He's saying it to Joseph who's literally just had his world upended.

He's saying it to you this evening. He is with you. He's got you. So how do we respond? How do we respond to this message?

What do we do with Jesus coming? How do we respond to the good news about Jesus who is the saviour you need and the God who promises to be with you?

How do we respond to Jesus? What does Joseph do? For Joseph it's a complete U-turn.

It's a complete change of direction. He goes from divorcing Mary to trusting God at whatever the cost. So if Jesus is for life not just for Christmas then that's a life-changing message.

[18 : 46] You need to weigh up that commitment for yourself. There's lots of ideas how you might explore how to respond rightly to this message of Christmas.

Lots of ways in the packs that you were given. You could come back for another of our festive services. You could put in a diary for our Back to Church Sunday in January. There's a book that will help you think through some of these things or maybe you'd find it helpful to sign up to our life course in January.

Explore the Christian faith that way. There's no doubt about it. Accepting Jesus as your saviour accepting him into your life is life-changing.

That's what we heard from Rebecca. You get forgiveness. You get God. So if God's speaking to you this Christmas don't wait until next Christmas to do something about it.

Don't stubbornly resist his call. Don't remain unmoved. Wear it up for yourself. Let's pray. Thank you Lord God this Christmas for the perfect gift in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[20 : 01] The offer of forgiveness from sins and the promise of your presence with us to the end of the age. Would you give us the faith to receive this gracious offer.

Amen. I'm going to sing again now. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.