

Session 4

December 24, 2023

THE SALVATION EXPRESSED IN GOD'S NAME

Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:18-25

The first time I led a candlelight service on Christmas Eve, I sounded like Linus in Charlie Brown's Christmas special. I started in Luke's Gospel and pieced together the New Testament texts as best I could in chronological order. But when I came to Matthew 1:22 and 23, I realized I left out a very important scene in the narrative that took me back about 700 years before Luke's account. In the ensuing years, Isaiah's important prophecies (Is. 7:14 and Is. 9:6-7) made it into the script.

The promise made (Is. 7:14). This iconic Christmas passage first appeared in the book of Isaiah. Ahaz, the king of Judah, was facing an attack that threatened to depose the king and ultimately destroy the nation. God spoke through the prophet Isaiah to assure King Ahaz that he had nothing to fear from the encroaching armies. Yet Ahaz continued to worry, to the point of "wearying" God with his concerns (v. 13). God told Ahaz to ask for a sign—any sign—to prove God's faithfulness to His people (v. 11). Ahaz was wise enough to decline, saying he would not be so foolish as to "put God to the test" (v. 12). In an act of sovereign superiority (as well as grace), God responded, "Therefore, the Lord Himself will give you a sign." Here, the faithfulness of God to His people Israel stretched far beyond the pending conflict Ahaz faced. This was a sign to all Israel that God would not only protect them from their enemies but would also deliver them from their sin. Four key thoughts are contained in this verse. First, this would be a sign given by God Himself that was both unmistakable and unattributable to anyone else. Second, the sign was not simply a truth-indicating event, but it would come in the form of a person. Third, the sign would be confirmed as miraculous: a virgin would conceive a child. Fourth, this virgin-born son would not be simply a sign from God; He would be the Son of God. His name of course, would be Jesus, which means "The Lord is salvation" (see Matt. 1:21). But His position would be more than a savior; He was Immanuel, "God with us." For reflection: Read Hebrews 2:14-17. What does this add to our understanding of Jesus being "God with us?"

The promise fulfilled (Matt. 1:18-25). The great "unsung hero" of the Christmas story was Joseph the carpenter. Mary was favored by God and chosen to bear His son. But I always felt like Joseph was kind of thrust into his role! He was engaged to be married to sweet Mary, only to be confronted with three big surprises. Surprise #1: "Your fiancée is pregnant, and you are obviously not the father." Surprise #2: "God is the Father." And surprise #3: "You will raise God's Son like He is your own." The Bible doesn't tell us that Joseph "treasured these things in his heart" like Mary did (see Luke 2:19). In fact, the Bible tells us very little about Joseph at all. But when it does speak, we see what kind of man Joseph was, and his important role in redemptive history. Some important features of the story are found in this passage. First, notice that Mary and Joseph were already betrothed (think "engaged"). There are multitudes of commentaries that explain all the supposed ins-and-outs of betrothal during this time, the marriage traditions, etc., but they tend to overshadow (and over complicate) the simple points: they were supposed to be married; Mary was found to be pregnant; Joseph could have cut it off (and he planned to do just that). Second, Joseph was a "righteous man." Mary was favored by God (see Luke 1:28), but Joseph was declared to be righteous by God. Third, Joseph was discreet

(v. 19). He did not want to humiliate Mary, even when he had every right to do so. Fourth, Joseph was open to God's instruction. The angel of the Lord came to him in his sleep, and Joseph believed the revelation given him. Finally, Joseph was obedient to God (v. 24). He did as commanded, married his bride, and kept her chaste until the baby was born. And of course, all this was in God's purposeful plan: "Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet." Mary was favored by God; Joseph was obedient to God; and Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled by God. For reflection: Read Phil. 2:5-11. How does this relate the Christmas story to God's purposeful plan?