

Bible Study > JESUS among us

Introduction & Chapter 1:

The four Gospels of the New Testament record the birth, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The first three books are called the Synoptic Gospels and are fairly similar to each other in their accounts. John's Gospel, however, is different. The first three Gospels record the various teachings and miracles but John gives a clearer significance and depth of meaning of the actions and preaching of Christ.

All the Gospels were written between 40 and 70 A.D. We can deduce this because none of them mention the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 72 A.D, just that Christ foretold this event.

Mark was a companion of Peter in his missions and recorded his teachings of Christ. Luke, a physician, was a Gentile. He seems to have researched the events as told by the disciples very carefully and then recorded it with a tilt towards Gentiles. His is a very cohesive book.

Matthew, a Jew, wrote primarily for the Jewish people. Being a Jew he had thorough knowledge of the Old Testament and hence the prophecies about the Messiah. He tries to connect the prophecies to Jesus' life and actions. His Gospel forms the vital link between the Old and the New Testament.

Matthew's Gospel follows an outline that is very cohesive. The first two chapters deal with Christ's genealogy, birth and infancy. The second phase concerns His ministry (chapters 5-25). The third phase is the Crucifixion (chapters 26 & 27), and the fourth the Resurrection (Chapter 28).

Today's Bible Class is Chapter 1:1-17, the genealogy of Christ. Matthew uses this to show that Christ is descended from David as foretold in the Old Testament. The Old Testament is full of genealogy. In fact the genealogical records were preserved in the temple. These were the legal proofs of one's ancestry. Probably this was one of the reasons Jesus' proclaimed descent from David was never challenged by the Pharisees.

As we read through the first 17 verses an unusual fact stands out. In the Old Testament, except for a few mentioned here and there, women were never heard of. This was because a woman was regarded as a possession of her father or husband on par with slaves. The Church believes that God inspired the writing of the Gospels and in Mathew He chose to acknowledge five women as Christ's ancestors.

As we look at all the forefathers mentioned in the book (14 generations) what becomes obvious is that some of them were very dubious characters –like David, the most famous of them all. He was a murderer, an adulterer and had a terribly dysfunctional family. Some of the others committed pretty nasty crimes. The five women mentioned were not all high minded people either. Let's take them one by one:

Tamar was a Gentile married to Er the eldest son of Judah (Jacob's son). The Bible says that Er was a nasty guy and so God "killed" him. By Jewish tradition since Tamar was childless she had to marry the next oldest brother who also happened to be a horrible man and met his death very quickly. She should then have married the third brother but Judah intervened and sent Tamar away promising that the wedding would take place later. He however never intended this to happen thus depriving Tamar of her legal inheritance and a place with God's chosen people. Finally by a little bit of scheming Tamar bore a child that was Judah's. You could say that here Tamar was more sinned against than sinning, but God acknowledged the fact that Tamar persisted because she wanted so much to be part of His people as she had faith in Him and His promise of life.

The second woman Rahab mentioned was a prostitute out of necessity – she was a Gentile but because of her faith in the greatness of the true God, she helped the Israelite spies. She chose to be with God's people and proved her faith by risking her life and that of her child to help the chosen people.

Ruth, the next women mentioned, is well known. Again, a Gentile –she chose to go with her mother in law leaving her own people because she wanted to be part of the true faith. Unlike the other two women, Ruth was morally pure. She gave up her security and happiness with the Moabites, her people, for God and ended up gaining love and happiness.

Bathsheba is the fourth woman, known because of David's misdeeds. David and Bathsheba lost their first child but David truly repented and God eventually forgave him and Solomon was born.

The last woman mentioned in the genealogy is Mary. Because of the goodness, and faith and submissiveness to God, Jesus was born to her.

From this genealogy I have learned a few things. When God inspired Mathew to name these five women, He was removing all racial barriers. Remember four of them were Gentiles. The second lesson I learned was that all believers are equal in the sight of God. In the Old Testament, man has discriminated against women but God has very clearly shown that in His sight women and men have spiritual equality. The third lesson is that each one is free to choose whether he or she believes in Christ. The past does not necessarily condemn them. However, when you sin you cannot escape the consequence.

We talk about God's grace and forgiveness being given freely. This is true. When we sin we are separated from God and that is the worst punishment for a believer. When you sincerely repent, God forgives you freely and gives His grace freely. However, the consequences of your action may continue to have an effect. In physics we learn that every action has an equal and opposite reaction. When we do something good or bad or say some hurtful things it may set in motion results that would not have been anticipated. What do I mean by that? The Bible is full of examples that highlight this. Let us take David again. He sent Uriah to be killed so that he could marry Bathsheba. As a consequence of his sin towards an innocent man, he and Bathsheba lost their first child. David realized his sin and fervently and honestly repented and God did forgive him. When Solomon built temples for various gods to please his wives and worshipped with them, breaking the first commandment, who paid the price for his actions? His future generation and the nation of Israel did. People looked up to Solomon and when they saw him worshipping other gods, they felt it was alright for them to worship other gods as well. Well, Israel paid for this by being condemned to slavery for a number of years.

In the New Testament, Annaias and Sapphira lied about their offering and the consequence was death. There are many more examples in the Bible about sin and its consequence.

So the "take home message" for our daily living would be:

(1) Spiritually there is no difference in worth between man and woman in the sight of God; differences in roles exist as well as man-made differences

(2) When you truly and honestly repent of your wrong deeds and try not to repeat it, God forgives and embraces you with love and forgiveness, and

(3) There are consequences to every action to which even if we repent, may still have an effect as it impacts other people. If you are wise you will learn from your mistakes and grow spiritually

From verse 18 onwards, Matthew deals with the birth of Christ. Matthew gives a very matter of fact stark-outline of the obedience and submission of Mary to God's wishes, the Holy Spirit creating the man Jesus in Mary, the angel telling Joseph not to divorce her as the child conceived by Mary was from the Holy Spirit and Joseph obeying God. In verses 22 and 23, Matthew says "all this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophets. The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son and they will call him Immanuel". The name means God with us. Luke gives us a beautiful version of the conception of Christ which also contains Mary's song known as the Magnificat (Luke Chapter 1).

Going back to Matthew, the seven verses 18 to 25, is packed with a lot of information of faith in action. Today if "an angel" appears to us, and gives us the same message, we would probably think "psycho". A virgin birth? Ha, Ha. A large number of "Christians" do not believe that a virgin birth took place. Is this truly impossible? We believe in the creation as presented in Genesis. As a physician, I marvel at the "science" in the make-up of our body, especially those billions of genes which is basically a human being. Each baby is created with co-dominant equal chromosomes from the mother and the father. In spite of mutations and combination of genes, the number of children being born without abnormalities is amazing. You can not but believe in God. So if God with the Holy Spirit can create the world out of nothing and create all that is in it, is it really impossible for the Holy

Spirit to create a child in a woman without the usual means? If we can accept the divinity of Christ and His resurrection is it difficult to accept the virgin birth?

What dumbfounds me, however, is the unquestioning faith that Mary and Joseph had. If something like this happens to us today, we would probably calculate the cost to us before giving an answer. Remember that Mary could have been stoned to death, if Joseph had divorced her. You could stop here and ask if Mary was only betrothed to Joseph how can he divorce her? Jewish customs were different then. An engagement was an understanding between the parents about their children's marriage. As the kids became of marriageable age they were betrothed. Though the couple would not be living together till their marriage they could get out of the betrothal only through divorce for valid reasons. Understanding this, now let us look at Mary's dilemma. When the angel told Mary that she was going to have a child through the Holy Spirit I wonder if the possibility of being stoned to death crossed her mind. All that we know is, because of her tremendous faith, she submitted to God's will. She also left it to God to take care of Joseph and the consequence.

Joseph proved his faith and obedience by accepting the will of God. Without Mary's and Joseph's obedience, God's purpose for this world would not have been accomplished. When Christ was born Joseph called the child Jesus as was directed by the angel. Isaiah had said that "He shall be called Immanuel", which means God with us, while Jesus is the Greek version of Joshua meaning God is salvation. The names point to Jesus' mission which is to save his people from sin and spiritual death.

We saw faith in action when Mary and Joseph accepted God's decree without question and left it to Him to guide them.

What is faith? In very simple terms, when we buy something from a sales person, we accept in faith that the product has the capability described. When a friend tells us something we accept it in faith and trust. In the Bible it says that God gave all people a measure of faith (Romans 12:3). He has also given us free will. We can choose to believe the scriptures or to believe the unbelieving world. It is only by constantly reading and learning the Scriptures that we can gain further faith and insight into God. Luke tells us in 11:13, "ask God humbly to give you His Holy

Spirit". Paul in Hebrews Chapter 11 defines faith and illustrates it through the lives of Old Testament heroes. He begins the chapter by wonderfully defining faith: "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see". Reading the rest of the chapter will show examples of faith in action.

What is our "take home" message from Matthew 1:18-25 that is meaningful in our daily lives?

- (1) Faith is a gift from God that we have to pray for
- (2) We can develop our faith by learning the Scriptures or reject it listening to unbelievers
- (3) Freedom to choose is given to us
- (4) Faith alone is not complete. Action in faith like Mary and Joseph is essential. It means that one should be able to act in obedience to God, and trust Him to work out the consequences.