

HOPE IN IMMANUEL - GOD WITH US

Key verse:

Matthew 1:23, “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us).”

“What are you struggling with? Are you hopeful, or are you hopeless?”

Before we dive into our main passage, I want to zoom out and see how Matthew begins his Gospel in verses 1–17. It's the genealogy of Jesus Christ. Honestly, if you're like me and you see a long list of names, it's tempting to rush through it, fully aware you're butchering half of them as you go. But Matthew is doing something really intentional here. He's not just showing us Jesus' family tree; he's showing that it's full of messy, broken people. Abraham was a liar. Jacob was a deceiver. Judah and Tamar had a complicated, uncomfortable story. Rahab was a prostitute. King David committed adultery and murder. Then there's a whole bunch of kings who failed. In other words, God's people have a long history of sin, failure, and brokenness.

But instead of hiding that, Matthew puts it right at the front of his Gospel. Why? To show us that God is not ashamed to enter into messy family stories like theirs... and like ours. He doesn't wait for us to get our act together or clean up our mess. He steps right into it. And Matthew is also setting up the whole focus of Christmas: it's not about gifts or living a perfect life; it's about our Immanuel God who came to be with us. If Jesus chose to come through a family line like that, it means there is hope for people like us.

All of us have our own messy story. If you could write your own “genealogy,” not just names, but your past, your sins, your failures, there are probably parts you'd never want to bring up. Things you did... or things that were done to you. So let me ask you again: what are you struggling with? Are you hopeful, or are you hopeless? Maybe it's relationships, or your health, school, your job, or finances. Maybe you feel like a failure and you feel like nothing is working out, so you just go through the motions. On the outside, we can celebrate Christmas, sing “Joy to the World,” post happy photos, and say, “Merry Christmas” with a smile. But on the inside, we can feel sad, empty, dark, and hopeless.

What if the main reason we feel so hopeless is not just what's happening around us, but what's missing inside of us? All these problems are real. But underneath them, there is a deeper issue: we try to deal with guilt without God's forgiveness, face the future without God's promises, and live our lives without God's presence. In other words, we can feel so hopeless when we try to live without our Immanuel God. Because Jesus, our Immanuel, is God with us and saves us from our sins, we can have real hope even in our messiest and most hopeless situations. And that is exactly what this passage is about. This morning, we will see this hope in three ways: in Joseph's crisis, in Jesus' name that saves us from our sins, and in his name Immanuel, God with us. My prayer is that during this Advent season, we would be reminded that our true hope is not that we finally fix ourselves or everything around us, but that in Jesus, our Immanuel, God is with us. And in Jesus, we are saved from our sins, our brokenness is healed, and we have hope.

Part 1. HOPE IN JOSEPH'S CRISIS

Matthew now zooms in on this “Christmas” couple, Mary and Joseph.

Look at verse 18. Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Mary and Joseph are betrothed. That doesn't just mean they're “engaged” like we think of today, where people can just call it off for whatever reason. In Jewish culture, betrothal meant they were already legally bound as husband and wife, but not living together yet. They could be addressing each other already, saying, “Good morning my hubby/wifey,” or “Goodnight yobo.” And to break this marriage agreement meant going through an actual divorce process, which brings significant emotional and financial stress. During the betrothal period, both families are planning the wedding party, inviting the guests, and taking care of all the details. So it's not just Mary and Joseph, but so many people are invested in this, and you can imagine Joseph's heart... dreaming of building his future house with Mary. But then, in the middle of all that hope, Mary was found to be with child. Matthew tells us that this baby is from the Holy Spirit. But Joseph doesn't know that. From his point of view, his fiancée is pregnant, and he knows for sure: it's not his. Uh oh did I hear Judge Judy Joseph must have been in shock, felt betrayed and angry... and for sure he was deeply hurt and sad. His hope of building a beautiful house church with Mary came crashing down.

You see, the Christmas story does not start with Christmas carols or “Jingle Bells.” It actually starts with a crisis. And Christmas was not so merry with Mary and Joseph. To make things worse, because of their legal marriage status, Joseph cannot just ignore this. So What does he do?

Look at verse 19. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. Joseph is described as a just man. What does that mean? It means he is a righteous man who cares about doing what is right before God and reflects God's character. So when this happens, he cannot just pretend all this is okay, but at the same time he is struggling to see what God would want him to do. What options does he have, really? In those days, Joseph could legally bring Mary to public trial and expose her to shame. But he doesn't. If I were to play devil's advocate, I might say “Joseph, why not clear your name? She's the one who broke the covenant. Let everyone know it's her fault so you can walk away looking righteous.” That would have been the natural response from a hurt man. Joseph must have gone through emotional and spiritual warfare. But instead of protecting his own reputation, he resolved to divorce her quietly. A just man.

Joseph hasn't done anything wrong, and we can all agree that as a Godly man, he doesn't deserve this. Yet his whole world is falling apart. How can such a crisis happen to a man like this? Matthew is showing us that being godly, or being a Christian, does not exempt us from the world's trouble, pain, and even suffering. Anyone who loves God can still walk through the deep valley of trials. Joseph is heartbroken, lost, and confused. But the good news is that God does not leave us in hopeless situations; he steps in. So how does God step into Joseph's hopeless situation?

Look at verse 20. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

“But, as he considered these things...” Joseph is struggling, probably losing sleep over it, just staring at the ceiling, overthinking everything, and trying to figure out what went wrong. Then God steps in: “An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, ‘Joseph, son of David...’” Before God tells Joseph what to do, he reminds him of Joseph’s identity. It means Joseph is not just a random guy with a broken heart; he is part of God’s plan with a broken heart. “Do not fear to take Mary as your wife...” For Joseph to take Mary as his wife, there is a lot of risk involved. He’s basically signing up to share Mary’s scandal. He is risking his reputation, his livelihood, and his identity as a “just” man. There’s going to be a lot of social stigma. And all 67 people in that village are going to be looking at them with shame. I don’t know the count for sure, probably couple of hundred, but I’m just saying it’s a tiny village “For that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” God tells Joseph that this baby is the work of the Holy Spirit, God’s miraculous work. I’m sure Joseph still has a lot of questions, but he trusts God and obeys anyway. Like Joseph, we might not have all the answers, or know how things are going to work out, but as long as we know *Who* is at work, we can trust that all things work together for the good of those who love him. Romans 8:28a This is Joseph’s hope. And this could be our hope too. Now, let’s think about this baby’s name.

Part 2. HOPE IN JESUS’ NAME

Let’s read verse 21. “She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” By naming this child Jesus, Joseph is not only accepting his role as a father, but more importantly he is trusting in God. This time the angel doesn’t just tell Joseph how this child is conceived; he tells him who this child is and what he will do. The name Jesus comes from the Hebrew name Yeshua, like Joshua, and it simply means, “The Lord saves.” “For he will save his people from their sins.”

At that time and place, people were politically oppressed by Rome. Rome controlled their land, took heavy taxes, and they didn’t have much freedom. But God doesn’t say, “He will save his people from Rome,” or “from poverty,” or “from their difficult circumstances,” or in Joseph’s case, from this painful situation. The angel says, “He will save his people from their sins.”

How about us? What do we need saving from? Is it loneliness? Maybe you think, “If only I could get married...” For married people, it might be, “If only I could be single again...” Or maybe you feel like you need saving from school, your job, or your finances. Naturally, we think our biggest problem is out there. But the Bible says our deepest problem is sin. “For all have sinned” (Romans 3:23a). Sin doesn’t just break God’s law; it breaks God’s heart, and it breaks us. It fills us with guilt, shame, and hopelessness.

Because of our sinful nature, we try to live without God's forgiveness, without God's promises, and without God's presence. We try to fix ourselves by working hard, studying hard, finding a romantic love, buying a new car or a house, or this one is a popular one scroll through social media because life feels too boring or too messy and other people's lives look so much better. I don't want my drama, I want Kdrama. But God came to step into our mess and meet our deepest needs and heal our deepest wounds. 1 Peter 2:24 says, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed."

God came to us not with thunder and lightning, but with gentleness as a little baby. He grew up, lived a perfect life we could never live, went to the cross, and died for our sins. On the third day, he rose from the dead to defeat the power of sin and death so that anyone who trusts in him can receive forgiveness of sins and live a new life. So our hope is not, "Maybe my situation will get better one day," but, "Jesus has saved me from my sins and given me a new identity as a child of God." (John 1:12). The Bible says that to all who receive him and believe in his name, he gives the right to become children of God. Like Mary and Joseph, we are not just ordinary, messy, broken people; we are children of God and part of God's plan. So Have you received him? Have you believed in his name?

Now, Matthew gives us another name that shows us who this child really is: Immanuel, God with us.

Part 3. HOPE IN HIS NAME IMMANUEL, GOD WITH US

Let's read verses 22 and 23. "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 'Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel' (which means, God with us)."

Here Matthew shows us the big picture. This is not just a random baby momma drama. It's part of God's plan foretold by the prophet Isaiah long before Mary and Joseph. God is not just somewhere up there looking down on us and shaking his head at our sins and messy lives. He doesn't wait for us to come clean and climb some spiritual mountain by being religious or just going to church, and praying the prayer. Instead, He comes down to us to meet our deepest needs because he loves us, however messy or hopeless we think we are. The Bible says, "but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

Later in Matthew's Gospel, he keeps going back to Isaiah to show us more of this Immanuel:
in Matthew 4, Immanuel is the great light in our darkness (Matt 4:15–16);
in Matthew 8, Immanuel is with us in our sickness and suffering (Matt 8:16–17);
in Matthew 12, Immanuel is with us in our weakness, and gives us hope (Matt 12:17–21)
In Jesus, God came to be with us. He is our Immanuel God.

So What does Immanuel look like in your life? What does Immanuel mean to you personally? Maybe you feel like you're in darkness right now, struggling with something, or feeling spiritually dry. God's answer is Christmas... not the season, but the person Jesus, our Immanuel, who came to be with us.

The Bible shows us what this Immanuel looks like when we're weak and struggling. Hebrews 4:15–16 says we have a high priest who “in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin,” so we can “draw near to the throne of grace” to “receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” He knows what it's like to be tired, tempted, lonely, and misunderstood. He sympathizes with us. So we don't have to be afraid and run away from God. His arms are wide open, waiting for us to come to him and find mercy and grace to help us.

This Immanuel hope isn't just for “his people” back then, or a few of us in church on a Sunday; this hope is for all people. The Bible calls him “the God of hope” who fills us “with all joy and peace in believing,” so that “by the power of the Holy Spirit” we may “abound in hope” (Romans 15:13). In Jesus, anyone can find hope.

So how do we live with this Immanuel hope practically? You might not know how to pray, or you might have sins you don't want to confess, but Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28, NIV). We can come to Jesus just as we are with all our sins, doubts, fears, and weaknesses and simply say, “God, help me.” And as we come to him, the God of hope will fill us with his joy and peace, so that even if our situation doesn't change right away, our hearts can still abound in hope because Immanuel God is with us. Now, let's see how Joseph responds to this hope.

Look at verses 24 and 25. When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus. Joseph wakes up and obeys. His circumstances didn't suddenly get better. But now Joseph has God's Word in his heart, and that is enough for him to trust and obey God in the middle of his crisis. Because Joseph puts his hope in God, God uses this messy situation as a blessing to all people. That's what God's hope looks like in a broken world... he works through messy, broken, ordinary people whose hope is in him.

For us, hope might look like one small step of obedience: not giving up on a hard relationship, confessing a hidden sin, or spending time with God in his Word and in prayer. Hope helps us not react to our circumstances, but trusting God in the middle of a messy situation and obey him even when we don't understand.

So as we close, let me ask you again: what are you struggling with? Are you hopeful or are you hopeless?

When I was asked to deliver one of the Advent sermons, I tried my best to avoid it. My excuses were: I already did it last year, I'm too busy and there are less than two weeks to prepare. I even said, “Why don't we give others opportunity to struggle with God's word?” They were nice excuses. But the real issue was, to be honest, I did not know if I had a message of hope. My marriage is up and down, and I feel hopeless about my situation... and on top of that, I don't know if my suit still fits me because my wife's food is bussin'

After I read the passage, I could not help but notice Joseph's hopeless situation and how God turned it around and used him to be part of the greatest message of hope. I realized maybe God is calling me even in my messy situation. Then I asked Pastor Mark what kind of messengers he is looking for so I could make another excuse. He said he is looking and praying for young messengers. Because of my last name, I accepted God's calling. So don't be surprised if I'm still in the young messengers rotation even in my 80s.

After accepting to be a messenger, my situation didn't get any better. But as I wrote and meditated on this sermon, I learned that hope does not come from having a comfortable life without any problems. Hope comes from our Immanuel God. The more I meditated on God's word, the more I realized that Jesus has already come to meet my deepest need: he saved me from my sins. Inside, I began to be filled with joy, peace and hope... even though my situation was still the same.

But that hope challenged me to trust God and even take risks. So instead of ignoring and holding a grudge against my wife, I kissed her. It was risky. But that kiss was filled with hope. You can ask her. Through my struggle with God's word, I realized that I do have a message of hope, not because of my situation, but because Jesus, my Immanuel God, has saved me from my sins, and he is with me.

The good news of Christmas is that Immanuel wants to meet you wherever you are. He stepped into Joseph's broken plans, into a broken family line, into a broken world, and surely he is not afraid to step into yours.

Our hope is not that everything in our lives will be fixed, but that Jesus has come as Immanuel, God with us, and that he has saved us from our sins.

So this time of the year, when we say "Merry Christmas," I pray that it's our confession of faith that "There is hope, because Immanuel God has come for me." May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Jesus our Immanuel, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. Merry Christmas!