

God With Us
Matthew 1:18–25
December 19, 2021

In Alan Jacobs' aptly-titled new book, *Breaking Bread with the Dead*, he attempts to convince his audience to "take up and read" *old* books written by, you guessed it, the dead. And at the outset—in the first chapter—this erudite/esteemed professor of humanities at Baylor calls the book he's penned, without shame, a "self-help book."¹ As you might guess, the number of self-help books at Barnes arguing for reading Milton and Plutarch are few and far-between.

So, what's his angle? How is breaking bread with the dead self-help? In essence, he makes the case that our culture—with information overload arriving at breathtaking speed (the "pre-packaged bubble of the new")—many of us have become prisoners of the present. Maybe you ask, "Is that bad? Is there something inherently wrong with living in the moment? New information means we're making some sort of progress, right?"

Well, Jacobs attempts to convince the reader that "the deeper your understanding of the past, the greater *personal density* you will accumulate."² To apply that, he means that *without* some perspective on the past and/or contemplation of the future, present difficulties will be more likely to throw us around. Zooming out to see the history of humanity—or even our own timeline—grants a perspective we cannot get otherwise. And from that better angle, we better understand what's happening today. And the better we might endure.

On that broader point, I think Alan Jacobs is right. So does Matthew.

We've not been in this book of the Bible, but we're going to spend the next three sermons in it. And it's worth pointing out that nearly every paragraph between the genealogy (Matt. 1:1–17) and the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7) is built around at least one text of Scripture.³ Old texts. And in the infancy narrative that we plan to cover over the next week (1:18–2:23), Matthew references five Old Testament texts.⁴ Now, is that merely something to study for Bible quiz? Or is Matthew wanting to show these believers that they should, in some sense, zoom out from Bethlehem and see what happened in the manger as part—a vital part, of course—of the unfolding purposes of God?

And in what way does that matter to us, to those who can't seem to remember past mercies and struggle to live in light of future grace? To those often myopically captive to the present?

1. In Joseph's present, God speaks and intervenes (vv. 18–20)

We didn't read the genealogy that precedes our text, but you know how it goes. So and so was the father of so and so. Then the next name. Then the next. Matthew does that for 17 verses, blitzing through dozens of generations. At the outset of his Gospel, he's not worried about your boredom; he's concerned with history. Name, name, name, name.

But, then, Matthew *slows* the narrative down. Verse 18: **Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows.** The way he slows down, and the particular language Matthew employs, intends to show us that *this* birth is in a class of its own.⁵ This birth is unique.⁶

¹ Alan Jacobs, *Breaking Bread with the Dead*, 20. As with many (all?) books, referencing this book does not = wholesale endorsement of every page.

² Jacobs, 19. Or, conversely, insofar as we're trapped in the present, "the more weightless we become."

³ Craig Keener, *Matthew*, IVPNTC, 55.

⁴ G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 3.

⁵ D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, EBC, 81.

⁶ Charles Quarles, *Matthew*, EGGNT, 18.

Verse 18 continues: **Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph.** This betrothal is not the quasi-serious six-year engagement of our day. This one was legally binding, the “fiancée” could be called the wife, and infidelity during the betrothal was tantamount to adultery.⁷ Further, to break the betrothal, the couple would actually need to divorce.⁸

With the seriousness of that culture’s betrothal in mind, we ought to feel with Joseph the shockwave of the next clause. Verse 18: **Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child.** Not only did they take betrothal seriously, Jewish culture took holiness seriously. So, even though Joseph and Mary were *already* committed to one another *as if* already wed, Matthew makes plain that they’d *not yet* become one flesh. And yet, she was **found to be with child.** Meaning, simply, that her pregnancy could no longer be hidden, even in her certainly loose-fitting Jewish attire.⁹

Though Matthew tells us the source of this conception—Mary was **found to be with child by the Holy Spirit**—it appears Joseph does not know that “by” yet. Maybe you noticed this when we read the text earlier, but while Luke’s account of Jesus’ birth focuses on Mary, this Gospel sees the unfolding events through Joseph’s eyes.¹⁰ And the shockwave we ought to feel with Joseph is this: he found the woman he was betrothed to—the woman he planned to spend the rest of his days with—pregnant.

The counsel, “Maybe you should sit down,” is sometimes wise because there are sentences so unsettling that the room might start spinning and your knees very well might buckle. So, as we consider this text from Joseph’s perspective, we should be reminded that what he found—what he found out—was *that kind* of seismic information. When what someone’s history has been building toward and what someone’s future hopes to be is seemingly obliterated in a moment, there’s no doubt they will be profoundly rattled.¹¹ Joseph’s not an exception.

Not *yet* knowing the connection between his own house and the Word dwelling among us, Joseph needed to act. Because both Jewish and Roman laws demanded that men divorce a wife guilty of adultery.¹² That religious or legal pressure would’ve been heavy upon Joseph, as would have been the pressures that proceed from the sneers of society. Should he *not* divorce her, many would assume that he’d been unchaste himself, or they’d whisper other shameful things about him.¹³

To save his own honor, the best play he had was to publicly shame Mary. If he did so, he might get his dowry back and save some semblance of his reputation.¹⁴ All he had to do was ruin her. But, verse 19: **And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly.**

Matthew describes Joseph as a righteous man, meaning one careful in his observance of the Law.¹⁵ If we were to continue on studying Matthew’s Gospel, we’d soon see a Man teach about a **righteousness that surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees** (5:20). Here in chapter 1, Matthew is hinting/foreshadowing, showing us that righteousness and mercy are *not* at odds.¹⁶

⁷ Carson, 74.

⁸ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 27.

⁹ Carson, 74.

¹⁰ Carson, 71; Keener, 59.

¹¹ Beale and Carson, 3.

¹² Keener, 60.

¹³ Keener, 61.

¹⁴ Keener, 62.

¹⁵ Morris, 27.

¹⁶ Quarles, 19; Scott Duvall and Verlyn Verbrugge, *Devotions on the Greek New Testament*, 16.

Joseph's righteousness *included* his desire to *not* disgrace Mary.¹⁷ Yet, desiring to live in accordance with the Law, he, v. 19, **planned to send her away secretly.**¹⁸ He's sorted through the options and settled on a way forward. He would *not* ruin her in the square. But, of course, this plan doesn't make any of it less heartbreaking. Joseph's future as he knew it was seemingly over.

Yet, verse 20: **But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, Son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit."** I slightly prefer the ESV's timing, emphasizing that the angel appeared **as he considered these things.**¹⁹ How many moments was Joseph *not* thinking about the soon implosion of his family? Yet, in the middle of his obsessing, maybe fretting, over what to do, Matthew writes, **behold**, a word that often introduces something intended to surprise.²⁰ Verse 20: **Behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream.** While dreaming, God speaks, intervening through an angel.

If we keep in mind the genealogy that immediately preceded our text, we'd not be surprised by what the angel calls Joseph: **Joseph, Son of David.** Matthew began his gospel with these words, **The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David** (Mt. 1:1). Then, the genealogy *itself* emphasized both David (1:17) and his rule (1:6). So, the angel gets right to the point, showing up in Joseph's dream to remind him of his lineage.²¹ The angel connects Joseph to his past, and to the past of his people. This is who you all are.

And that would remind Joseph who it is they all waited for. In our day, we're so disconnected from our history—so absorbed with the "bubble-wrapped new"—that one day our great-grandkids very well might not know our names. But that "presentism" is *not* how all cultures have lived. In other eras, and places, genealogies mattered. And in one of those contexts—Israel 2000 years ago—for hundreds and hundreds of years the people of God looked for, and longed for, a particular Davidic ruler. Because in 2 Samuel 7, God promised a son of David: **I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever** (2 Sam. 7:13). But kings came. And kings, from the line of David, died. Israel was still awaiting this particular promised Ruler. Psalm 2, Psalm 16, Psalm 89, Psalm 132, pointed toward One who'd come, rule, and never see corruption (Psalm 16; Acts 2:24–32). The angel reminds Joseph that he is a son of David.

And we don't have to wonder whether Joseph was fearful in these moments. This verse makes it clear. The angel continues in v. 20, **Joseph, Son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.** Easier said than done, Joseph is instructed to forget what society might think, to stop listening to his own heart, to believe what he's *not yet* seen, and to embrace Mary as his bride. How might Joseph face his fear, risk his own reputation, and settle down with a woman who'd seemingly betrayed him? Verse 20: **Joseph, Son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.** The angel declares good news. Mary had not betrayed him. For Joseph, and others, God had intervened.²²

While we often call this the virgin *birth*, it might be better described as the virgin conception.²³ For the skeptical, let me start with Glen Scrivener's wonderfully direct comment: "Christians believe in the virgin birth of Jesus. Atheists believe in the virgin birth of the universe.

¹⁷ Morris, 28.

¹⁸ Carson, 75. In this way, he'd be both righteous and compassionate.

¹⁹ Quarles, 19.

²⁰ Carson, 81.

²¹ Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, NAC, 59.

²² Quarles, 20. Matthew's language, the angel's language, depicts the Spirit *not* as an agent in the act of conception, but as the source of the baby's origin. For the nerds, the odd insertion of *εστιν* (*estin*) in the original portrays this.

²³ Blomberg, 57.

Choose your miracle.”²⁴ There’s a worldview that automatically stiff-arms the idea of a virgin conceiving. But the question of whether or not Mary could conceive as a virgin is really a question of whether or not God can create life without our help. Can He? Has He? Consider, first, the first page of the Old Testament. Two men in the history of the human race have been born apart from the act that generally creates life. And if God made Adam from the dust of the ground (Gen. 2:7), then certainly He can cause a baby to be born of a virgin. Secondly, consider resurrection. If God can make dead hearts beat, whether that’s Lazarus, Jairus’ daughter, or someone crucified, then clearly He can create life. He doesn’t need our help.

Further, we all know that, yes, there are intermediate causes, but *ultimately* God breathes life. No one stands in the delivery ward at Germantown Methodist and says to their spouse, “Look what *we* did, all by ourselves, honey!” Yes, science explains it, but it doesn’t exhaust it. God operates in this world most often according to laws He wrote, but as the One who created those laws, He is not bound by them.

Further, as one man wrote, “Would anyone doubt . . . that of all the miraculous births in history, the Messiah’s should be the most miraculous?”²⁵ If you doubt the virgin birth, then you must also doubt whether God can create life. If you doubt that God can create life, then you ought to live it up, and in a hurry. But if you believe God can create life, and has—fashioning you—then the conception of a virgin is not unbelievable. And if He can create life, then we don’t *have* to live it up now, we can—and ought to—live for Him.

Into Joseph’s seemingly devastated present, God speaks through an angel. This angel reminds Joseph of God’s purposes through David. The angel helps Joseph to zoom out and see what God might be accomplishing. And the angel reminds Joseph that the God who threw the stars into place continues to work on behalf of His people.

Do you long for God to speak into your present? Might I suggest adopting the Berean spirit of Acts 17 Pastor Phil discussed just last week.²⁶ Be reminded who this God is by sticking your nose in His account of the world’s history. Your history.

Joseph is devastated by his present. God clarifies what’s going on. And He continues to clarify by speaking of what’s *to come* in verse 21.

2. Into Joseph’s future, God speaks and promises (v. 21)

The angel continues in verse 21: **She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus.** There are three future tense verbs in this verse. First, maybe we assume Joseph *knew* this child was going to be a boy, but that’s not necessarily the case. Almost all of this information could have been cloudy, overwhelming, maybe unreal. You’ve seen the baby bump, maybe; you’ve been perplexed over it, certainly. Let me make it *real* for you, Joseph. Your soon-to-be wife Mary will bear a son.

In fact, it’s so real that I’m going to tell you what you *will*—our second future tense verb—name Him. Verse 21: **She will bear a son; and you shall call His name Jesus.** This might seem to be an unimportant detail at this point, but *by naming* Him Joseph officially accepted the child, giving him the status of a descendent of David.²⁷

²⁴ <https://twitter.com/glenscrivener/status/419856132190924800>

²⁵ Keener, 57.

²⁶ <https://subspl.sh/xq5wkvb>

²⁷ Morris, 29. See also Blomberg, 59.

That name, as many of you know, is the Greek form²⁸ of Yeshua (Joshua), meaning, “Yahweh is salvation” or “the Lord saves.”²⁹ Joseph knew what the name meant. The angel explains it anyway. Why is he to name this baby “Jesus”? Verse 21: **She will bear a son; and you shall call his name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.** Our third future tense verb tells us what this unborn baby *will*—not *might*—do. And the angel says this in such a way to communicate that He, and *only* He, will save.³⁰ I couldn’t help but think of what Paul and Silas told the Philippian Jailer when he asked, **Sirs, what must I do to be saved?** They replied, **Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved** (Acts 16:31).

And what is it that this Jesus will save from? Jews like Joseph lived under the oppression of Roman occupation. Will they finally be delivered from Caesar? The angel says, v. 21, **He will save . . . from their sins.** Note that it doesn’t say, “He will merely save from the *punishment* due them because of their sin, or merely from the wrath of God *against* their sin,” but that He will save **from their sins.** Chuck Quarles writes that it’s almost as if the angel personifies these sins, “portraying them as enemy combatants who have captured people and keep them as hostages or slaves.”³¹ That’s precisely what sin is, and does. Sin’s a pain pill laced with fentanyl. Or as one songwriter portrays it, “Our enemy, our captor, is no Pharaoh on the Nile; our toil is neither mud nor brick nor sand; our ankles bear no callouses from chains, yet Lord, we’re bound; imprisoned here, we dwell in our own land; . . . our shackles were made with our own hands.”³² *This* is what this newborn will rescue from. Yes, from the punishment due. Yes, from the wrath of God. But also—into the core of humanity’s malady—He will save from the enslavement that sin brings into our lives.³³ He saves to the uttermost.

And who is it that He will save? Verse 21: **He will save His people from their sins.** There’s nothing vague about Jesus’ atonement for sinners.³⁴ For a people on whom He’d set His heart, He will die. From heaven He came and sought her for whom He’d rise. Maybe you find this harder to believe than the virgin birth. For you, that the God who cast stars into the heavens can create life in a womb is not that big a stretch. But to say that the One who’s seen every nook within—every motive, each thought, all deeds—would send His own Son so that we might be free. Can I truly believe that?

Over the past few years I’ve grown to deeply love the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism. We sing hymns based upon it.³⁵ That first question is, “What is my only comfort in life and in death?” We respond, “That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.” The second question of that catechism builds upon the first, asking a profoundly practical question, *how?*: “How many things must you know to live and die in the joy of this comfort?” The answer is simple, responding, “Three: first, how great my sin and misery are; second, how I am delivered from *all* my sins and misery; third, how I am to thank God for such deliverance.”³⁶ That’s how we might live in the joy of the gospel’s comfort.

²⁸ Ἰησοῦς

²⁹ Beale and Carson, 3.

³⁰ By the use of the emphatic pronoun. See Morris, 29 and Quarles, 21.

³¹ Quarles, 21.

³² Andrew Peterson, “Deliver Us”

³³ Beale and Carson, 3.

³⁴ Matthew elaborates in 20:28: **The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.** And then at the Lord’s Table, Matthew 26:28: **This is the blood of my covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins.** See Gibson, eds. *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her*, 276–277.

³⁵ “Christ Our Hope in Life and Death”

³⁶ I read this last week in a devotional I’d commend, Jonathan Gibson, *Be Thou My Vision: A Liturgy for Daily Worship*, 243.

The angel assures Joseph of this. This promise about the future—about a soon-coming Yeshua—isn't the first time God spoke and assured His people of something.

3. In Joseph's past, God made promises (vv. 22–23a)

Not only is this *not* the first time God's made promises, everything that's happened thus far in the text had already been told. Verse 22: **Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet.** First, as an important side note, notice the prepositions and what they tell us about Scripture. What has been written down has been spoken **by the Lord**. It's His word. But He communicates it **through the prophet**.³⁷

In this case, the prophet God spoke through was named Isaiah. In Isaiah's day, some 700 years prior, God spoke something *through* Him, a promise He intended to fulfill. I think it's helpful to think of these Old Testament prophecies by sort-of flipping the word "fulfillment" around, as in, "filled–full."³⁸ That means, in many cases, that the Old Testament prophecy did come to pass to some degree in the prophet's day, but it was to be "filled–full" at a date to come.³⁹ Partial fulfillments often precede and foreshadow later complete fulfillments.⁴⁰

Matthew wants us to see,⁴¹ not only that God can create life, but that He can and does govern history. And that He is governing history for His purposes. He wants us to zoom out and see that Yahweh fulfills promises He made hundreds of years before. Verse 22: **Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet.**

Would you affirm the sovereignty of God in general terms, check the box on an exam, but *not* affirm it in that specific circumstance? Are you a prisoner of the present because you've not availed yourself of the history of God's unfolding purposes? If you can't remember the last time you read Isaiah, break bread with the dead prophet, and see Jesus. And you'll see God's gracious purpose and promise unfold. And, by the Spirit, the latest calamity in your life might be less likely to knock you over.

In Joseph's present, God spoke and intervened. Concerning his future, God spoke promises of a Son and Salvation. Of course, He'd made and kept promises before. So, finally,

4. Into Joseph's present, God fulfills those promises (vv. 23b–25)

He governs history for His purposes. He fulfills promises. And He fulfills those promises in the person of His Son. Verse 22: **Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Behold, the Virgin shall be with child and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which translated means, "God with us."**

We come to one of the richest clauses in all of God's revelation: **God with us**. Without hesitation, Matthew applies Isaiah 7 to Mary's soon-to-be born Son. He makes plain: when this baby comes, God will have come. That's the sense of **God with us**. The One to whom all glory was due was born in the likeness of men. Mary gave birth to the promised King: the Son of David. Being born to Mary highlights His human nature. And being born to a virgin highlights His divine nature.

³⁷ Ultimate agent and intermediate agent, Quarles, 22; Carson, 77.

³⁸ A common meaning of the verb *plēroō* (πληροω), Blomberg, 57.

³⁹ Some call this a double fulfillment, Beale and Carson, 5. They believe Isaiah's prophecy first referred to Isaiah's own son, who was *not* born of a virgin, of course. It's a partial fulfillment. But they also point to the broader context, in particular Isaiah 9:6, which seems to depict this son as the divine, messianic king, 5. That's the complete fulfillment, when it's filled–full.

⁴⁰ Blomberg, 60.

⁴¹ And maybe the angel wants Joseph to see. Carson says the angel keeps speaking until the end of verse 23, 76.

Truly God. Truly man. God became man.⁴² *God with us*. And maybe you wonder, “How can God—the just God—be with *us*? To do so, He must fulfill the promise made Joseph in verse 21. To be with *us*, He must come, yes, but He must come and save.

What does Joseph do when he hears all this? His world has been turned upside down. Joseph trusts the One who makes and keeps promises. Verse 24: **And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife, but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus.** Joseph believed the gospel.

God came. And He came so that He might save. And He saved so that He might be with us.

Conclusion

This theme—God with His people—has run throughout the Scriptures.⁴³ In Genesis 15, God is *with* Abraham. In Genesis 26:3, God tells Isaac, **Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you.** In Genesis 28:15, God tells Jacob, **Behold, I am with you.** In Genesis 39:2: **The Lord was with Joseph.** When God told Moses to go to Pharaoh, and Moses thought himself unequal to the task, God said in Exodus 3:12, **But I will be with you.** After Moses, God tells Joshua (Yeshua) **Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you** (Josh. 1:5). Even in the valley, David does not fear, why? Because God is with him (Ps. 23:4). We could line up and name dozens of other instances, in the prophets or elsewhere. This truth buoyed Old Testament saints. Though they couldn’t see Him, God was with them.

And then, what had been promised for generations upon generations was made manifest. What the prophet pointed to in Isaiah 7, came to be in Matthew 1. John writes that God put on flesh and dwelt among us (Jn 1:14). The disciples stared the radiance of the glory of God in the face, asked Him questions, and broke bread with Him. God was *with them*, better than ever before. But the One Joseph named in our text tells the 12 one day that He’s going away (John 13:33). **God with us** no more, they thought. Imagine their despair. “Finally, You’re here. Now you’re leaving?” Jesus replies: it’s actually to their advantage (Jn 16:7). Could it get better?

It could. Because better than God *with* the disciples, limited to one place and time, God Himself would dwell *in* His people—*with* them *wherever* they were—by His Spirit.

So, who all can trust and be comforted by this truth: **God with us**? Is it just us in this room? Is it just us in this century? No, Isaiah looked forward to it. 2000 years ago, Joseph welcomed it. Mary did too. As did Lydia in Philippi and Epaphras in Colossae. In the fourth-century Athanasius *gloried in God with us*. So would Amy Carmichael and J. C. Ryle and maybe your neighbor, or your grandmother, and hosts of others in the centuries since.

Have you lost perspective on what God’s done for His people in Bethlehem, later at Jerusalem, and then all over the world by His Spirit? Are you a prisoner of the present? Consider **God with us**, past, present, and future, and look forward to the day when we’ll break bread with One who was *once* dead, but is alive forevermore: **God with us**.

⁴² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 530, “If we think for a moment of other possible ways in which Christ might have come to the earth, none of them would so clearly unite humanity and deity in one person.”

⁴³ David Platt runs this theme through the Scriptures in http://www.radical.net/files/uploads/ABIDE_TS2_Web.pdf