

## GOD WITH US

Matthew 1:12-25

Key verse: 23

"The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"—which means, 'God with us.'"

I thank God for blessing our 2010 Summer Bible Conference with Nagasaki UBF. With the theme, "Live by faith," we studied about many great heroes of faith both in history and contemporary. Personally, I was moved by those who lived by faith even though their situation never changed. Now our ministry in Oita seems small and the work of God in Japan seems difficult. But I learned that God doesn't commend the result. He commends our faith. May God help us to seek His kingdom first and live by faith from first to last no matter what.

Today we are returning to our study of Matthew's gospel. In the first two lessons, we studied about the genealogy of Jesus Christ. God used all kinds of people to fulfill his salvation plan. The same was true in the last period from Babylon to the birth of Jesus. For example, Jeconiah's evil was so great that his line was cursed and no biological son could inherit the throne after him. In contrast, Zerubbabel was a Godly man and was used to lead the Israelites out of Babylon back to Jerusalem where they began to rebuild the temple (Ezra 5:2) and make thanksgiving offerings to God (Ezra 3:2). Although each person must kneel before Jesus individually and be judged for what they've done, God is most powerful and can work through any situation. As we know, the economy in Japan isn't good now and many people need to work in hard situations with low salaries. At our company, the president makes endless demands and the employees suffer. Others struggle with tiredness in caring for a household and children. But even in tough situations, God can work and reveal His glory.

After the genealogy, Matthew describes Jesus' birth. It was a focal point in history which God's servants such as Abraham and David were waiting for. If it were today, we guess there would be a big celebration like the Oita Tanabata Festival. But Jesus' birth was very quiet. He was born humbly to ordinary people during the night in the small town of Bethlehem which was smaller than Beppu. Although most people didn't even notice, this child was Immanuel which means God with us. May God help us to open our spiritual eyes through this passage to see God in Jesus and begin a new eternal friendship with him.

Look at verse 18. "This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit." Like today, people usually had an engagement period before getting married. It was a chance to get to know each other and prepare for the wedding. Maybe they prepared special food and made a beautiful wedding dress. Purity was especially emphasized during this period as the couple should not engage in physical relations before the marriage ceremony. Those who were caught disobeying this rule, especially with another partner should be stoned to death according to Moses' law.

Mary was an innocent and holy young woman of God. Although she had remained chaste, suddenly she was pregnant with a child through the Holy Spirit. This is the only way that God could come to be with us. In Genesis 3:15, God promised to send the Messiah through the offspring of a woman. God wanted to be with mankind, but the only way to come into the world and still remain holy and sinless was to be born through the work of the Holy Spirit.

For Joseph, Mary's fiancée, this wasn't easy to accept. The only explanation he could think of was that Mary had been unfaithful and became pregnant through another man. Joseph loved Mary and didn't want her to be stoned so he decided to divorce her quietly. As Joseph struggled with this, an angel appeared and assured him that Mary's child was the work of God. Although it didn't make much sense, Joseph's doubts were lifted and he was strengthened to accept and obey God's leading by faith.

Here we learn that God wants to help us in our time of confusion. Just as God sent an angel to Joseph when he was struggling so God wants to talk to us through studying the bible, prayer, and listening to other people. Those who are proud, self-centered, or have hard hearts can't hear God's voice to them even if God screams loudly. But when we open our ears to the Lord and listen earnestly for his answer, we will hear even the small whispers which will guide us along the path of truth and strengthen us in our lives of faith.

Look at verse 21. "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." In those days, many people had the name Jesus. It appears several hundred times in various forms in the Bible. The name Jesus was commonly used as a symbolic hope for the Lord's salvation through a Messiah who would purify his people and save them from oppression. However, the angel points to a more important theme: "to save his people from their sins."

What does this mean, "save people from their sins"? When God first made the world, it was perfect. People had a perfect relationship with each other, with animals, and with God. However, one day, man disobeyed God's command and the relationship with God was broken. God punished man by taking away his eternal life in the paradise so we should die. Man tried to fill the void in his heart through drinking, sex, and committing various sins but the only way to restore the original happiness was to be reconciled with God. For thousands of years, people killed animals and offered them as sacrifices to God as a symbol of their repentance. But still we should die and be separated from God forever. That is, until Jesus came as a sinless person and died on a cross to pay the death penalty for us. Through faith in Jesus' death, we are fully forgiven and reconciled to God. Through Jesus' death we are saved from the penalty of sin and the negative effects of sin and restored as holy children in God's family and God's kingdom.

Everyone needs to be saved from sin without exception. It doesn't matter if we are the prime minister of Japan or work a part time job in Tokiwa. It doesn't matter if we seemingly do good to others or do evil all the time. Everyone is a sinner. And everyone needs to be saved by God through Christ.

I have one friend who suffers a lot because of sin. Although he tries to quit smoking, study Japanese, get a job, and fix his life again and again, he has no power to do so. It is because his sin is more powerful than he believes. The only way to win the battle against sin is to repent and humbly turn our hearts to Christ. When we do, we will be rescued from this terrible life and have new hope, new joy, and real peace. It is not because we do it ourselves; it is not because of some great philosophy we find on the internet; it happens because Jesus does it for us. Lord, please hear our crying prayers, and save this young man's life!

Matthew recognized that the message the angel gave to Joseph in the dream was prophetic. Look at verses 22-23. "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel -- which means, God with us."

Until then, the God of the Old Testament had been distant. Nobody had ever seen God and orthodox Jews were afraid to even say God's name. God wants his people to revere him. But he also wants us to know his grace and have a personal and intimate relationship with him. Jesus' coming into this world wasn't only a miraculous birth. It was God's coming so he might be with us. Jesus' birth was the best evidence that God exists and that God wants to be our friend.

In Japan, many people live in apartments and don't know their neighbours. When I go to work in the morning, I see many people driving their cars by themselves. At work, many people even eat by themselves and don't say anything. Like many developed nations, Japan is a lonely country. So many people are thirsty for love and friendship.

Jesus is Immanuel -- which means, God with us. Even though others don't understand us, Jesus understands us. Even though others don't want to be our friend, Jesus wants to be our friend. God with us means that we are not alone in this world. God is with us now and for all eternity when we make a decision to walk with him through Christ.

"God with us," is God's personal invitation to each of us to come to him and begin a personal relationship with him. When we accept this invitation to walk with God through Christ we find an eternal friend who will be with us always just as we are. May God be with us to build a close and intimate relationship with Jesus as we study Matthew's gospel. May many people in Oita meet Jesus as their friend through one-to-one bible study and this city may be united as one in the love of Christ.