

Pastor Kyle Mercer  
A Different Life Than You Planned

December 14, 2025  
Series: Messengers  
Matthew 1:18-25

**BIG IDEA - HOW GOD WORKS THROUGH UNEXPECTED CIRCUMSTANCES TO FORM OUR CHARACTER, SHAPE OUR FAITH, AND REMIND US THAT HE IS NEAR**

Suffering is no respecter of persons. I wish I could tell you, "The godlier you are, the less you're going to suffer." We know that's not true, because sometimes it is the absolute best people that the worst things happen to. Right? In fact, 1 Peter tells us that, as Christians, if we're in here today (I know not all of us are Christians), we should not be surprised by suffering. In fact, sometimes being a Christian means you might even suffer more.

I hope one of the things you heard in Katy's story is the importance of community. I want you to know this. Life is way too hard to do it alone...*way* too hard. You got to hear about the power of a godly husband in her life. They were newly married, and the vows were immediately tested. What didn't get to make it into the video is also the way our staff and our Community Group and this church have come alongside them.

Now, when we shot that video about a month ago, we didn't know how her future appointments were going to go, but I'm glad to share that, as of two weeks ago, Katy is cancer-free. Yes. The Bible says, "Rejoice with those who rejoice," but it also says... This is the hard thing in Christian community and being part of a local church. We're to rejoice with those who rejoice and, at the same time, sometimes in the same church service, we have to weep with those who are weeping.

Some of you are like, "I'm in the middle of *my* story, and I don't have cancer anymore. I'm in the middle of my hard job or my hard relationship or my infertility." We're going to pray for you in just a moment. We're going to particularly pray for North

Forsyth High School, as they have dealt with the death of a high schooler in a senseless act of violence. We're going to pray for them as they grieve and for the church to be the church. Let's pray.

Lord, I want to pray, and we do thank you for all of the areas we could rejoice with those who are rejoicing. We want to particularly pray right now, this Christmas season, for those who feel like they are in the middle of their own story of suffering and struggle and sin. They're saying something similar to what Katy said, which is "I never thought this was going to be part of my story." We want to pray for comfort. We want to pray for grace.

We want to pray for them to invite people into their life who can help them and serve them and speak the Word of God to them in this season. We particularly pray for North Forsyth High School, all of those hurting, all of those grieving. We particularly pray for the families, for the students, the staff, and we pray for the church and for Christians to genuinely *be* the church and to bring the help and hope and healing that are only found in Christ. In his name we pray these things, amen.

I don't know if this is true for you, but we were sitting around with my Community Group this last week, and we were talking about a bunch of different stuff. This wasn't even on the agenda, but what came up was how hard it is to put and keep Christ in Christmas. I don't know if anybody else struggles with that, but I thought about it. Why is it so hard? Well, one of the reasons it's so hard is it's just hard in life to put Christ at the center.

But this time of year... Have you noticed this? There are two Christmases happening at the same time in America. There's the Christmas of the nativity scene, angels and Mary and Joseph and baby and manger and wise men and shepherds, and there are all of the songs that go along with it. In fact, some of you came to church today and thought, "I thought we were going to sing more of the Christmas songs because it's Christmastime."

*That's* happening, but at the same time, there's the Christmas of culture. I can tell that you guys are celebrating that because some of you are wearing your ugly Christmas sweaters. Some of you don't know it's an ugly Christmas sweater. Welcome. It's all of the gift giving that's so exciting and the cookie exchanges and the secret Santas and the white elephants. For some of you, your favorite Christmas song is Mariah Carey's "All I Want for Christmas Is You," which, just so you know, is not about Jesus. If you didn't know that, now you do.

So, what we're doing in this series is we're going back to the first Christmas, and we're going, "God, help us understand the main message of Christmas by learning it from the first messengers at Christmas." So we're going back. If you're new and

you're joining us...it's a great time to be new...we're in the third week of looking at the five angel appearances around the birth of Christ. Last week, we looked at Mary. This week, we're going to look at Joseph.

I'm going to be able to say something that I've never been able to say before, which is "Open your Bibles to the first page of the New Testament." That's going to be Matthew, chapter 1. We've never been there before. Whether it's the Bible in your app or the Bible on your lap, I want you to find Matthew, chapter 1. If you have one of those real Bibles, go past the big part of your Bible to the smaller part of your Bible.

In fact, if you're new, here's how to think about the Bible. There's Old Testament, and there's New Testament. The Old Testament is the big book; the New Testament is a small book. The Old Testament is promises made; the New Testament is promises kept. Now, look at verses 1-17. Just look at them really quickly. Just glance at them. I'm not going to read them all.

I know. You go, "Kyle, there are a bunch of names." You might think, "Kyle, who put the Hebrew phone book in my Bible?" By the way, genealogies are really important in the Bible. In the first 10 chapters of Genesis, we get two genealogies. Of the first 10 chapters of the Bible, 20 percent is about lineage, legacy, and family. We don't think that way anymore.

Then, if you get to 1 Chronicles 1-9 (not 1 *Corinthians*...1 *Chronicles*) in your Old Testament, which is kind of the history, in part, of Israel up until that point, it's nine chapters of a genealogy. Now, when you read those names, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, "Kyle, I know why you didn't put this on the screen: because you can't pronounce some of those names." That's true.

If you look at those names, there are 42 names there. This might be something interesting to do with your Community Group. Go look at the people there, because what you'll notice immediately is "I know some of those people, and they were great people." Then, if you know your Bible just a little bit better, you might go, "I know some of those people, and they were terrible people. How did they end up in the first chapter of the New Testament?"

What did I tell you? The Old Testament is promises made; the New Testament is promises fulfilled. The list of those people is... Not *all*. It's not an exhaustive list. It's the people God made promises *to* and had a plan *for*. By the way, the last type of person... If you look at that list, you're going to be like, "I don't even know..." You might know your Bible really, really well, and you read that list and go, "I don't know some of these names." That's because God has worked through ordinary, average people who are anonymous to the rest of us.

If you go to verse 18, where we're going to pick up today, I want you to understand this. I want to start right at the beginning of the New Testament. We're moving from 42 names to one name. Everything in the Old Testament is anticipating and announcing Jesus. Everything in the Old Testament is preparing for and ultimately pointing toward Jesus.

In verse 18, he shows up in Matthew's gospel. Look here. **"Now the birth of Jesus Christ..."** By the way, *Christ* is not Jesus' last name. *Christ* is a title...Anointed One, King, Messiah. **"Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way."** We're going to talk about birth. Okay?

We're going to talk about a baby being born, which doesn't sound like a big deal. Think about it. Every year roughly 132 million babies are born. Do the math. That's 360,000 babies born every day. That's one baby every 4 seconds. Twenty babies were just born. Isn't that amazing? That's how quickly it happens.

So, why are we talking about one birth of one baby from 2,000 years ago? It's because... We'll all find this. It's all in the name *Jesus Christ*. It's all later in the name *Immanuel*. It's all going to make sense. See, the Bible itself tells us the *way* Jesus was born and *why* he was born. Both are important.

What's going to happen every time around this year, if this is even still around... The History channel, if anybody still has that... Some of you are like, "I have YouTube TV. Maybe I have that." I don't know. But if you go to the History channel, there's going to be something about Jesus you didn't know, and they're going to tell you. There's nothing new to know.

Or at Easter or Christmas, there will be someone, some professor of religion, or whatever, at some university writing some book about Jesus about something we don't know. Well, I want us to focus today on what the Bible clearly says, and we're going to pick up in verse 18. Let's continue.

**"Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary..."**

Who we're not going to talk a ton about because we talked about her last week.

**"...had been betrothed..."** That basically means almost married. It was more serious than engagement. They took their vows, but they did not consummate or celebrate the marriage yet. **"...had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit."**

We saw last week that whole story and how Mary finds out that she's going to be pregnant with the Son of God. Now, reading the Bible is a lot like walking into a room where somebody is on the phone with somebody else. Have you ever had that happen? You're like, "Who are you talking to?" You can only hear one side of the

conversation. You don't know how the other person is responding because you're just in the room hearing the one person.

We don't know all of the events around Mary and her getting pregnant and exactly how she tells Joseph, but in between verse 18 and verse 19 (we'll get to verse 19 in a second), Mary tells Joseph she's pregnant. You go, "How is all this practical to my life Christmas season?" Here's what I want to talk to you about for one second: needing to have a hard conversation.

There are a lot of lessons I've learned in 10 years of being a senior pastor. At the top of the list is most people need to have a hard conversation they've been avoiding. Let's just talk about it for a second, because Mary is going to have an unbelievable... She's 14, 15, or 16 years old. No question, this is going to be the most difficult conversation of her entire life.

So, let's talk about why a conversation is a hard conversation. Just think about any conversation with somebody that you need to have. Why is it hard? Same reason for all of them: because you don't know how they're going to react or respond. It wouldn't be hard... It would be an easy conversation. Right?

That's why you can have the conversation with yourself. You can walk through what you're going to say. That's not that hard. It's doing it in front of *them*, because almost every hard conversation has *this* part of it: "There's something you don't know that you're about to learn." Usually, it has to do with a sin. Not always. That's what's so hard about confession.

By the way, if someone is confessing sin to you, here's what I need you to know: they've wanted to do it for a long time. You just have to know that. They've wanted to do it for a long time. Your teenage daughter wanted to tell you for a long time. So, have that in your mind when she finally tells you something.

On the other side of it, here's what you need to understand if you're confessing something to somebody: you are letting them in on something you've already known about. Usually, it's something you haven't... Because this is how people are. It's a conversation you haven't had for three years.

Maybe you've been hiding something for two or three years, and then you finally tell your husband or your wife or your parents. Do you know what they're going to say? "Were you struggling with this two years ago when we were at the beach?" They'll start asking a ton of questions, because they'll start thinking, "There are a lot of things that you know that I don't know. Now I don't even know how the past is."

Sometimes the conversation is hard because you need to talk to them about something they don't want to talk about. That's why sometimes you're like, "It's too intellectually and emotionally difficult to talk to you about this." You want to try to be the kind of person people could talk to about things.

For Mary, she's in a unique situation. She needs to talk to Joseph about something she knows he's not going to believe. I mean, can you imagine the conversation? "Joseph, I'm pregnant. I know we've never been together, and I've never been with anybody else, but I am pregnant. But do not worry. It is with the Son of God. I knew you would have questions. This is why an angel appeared to me last night." You know, Joseph is like, "And was the unicorn with him?"

Here's what I want to talk about secondly. This is so practical. I don't know if you've ever read the story this way and thought about this. Joseph feels betrayed. What do you do when you're betrayed? Most of us are going to live long enough that we're going to experience betrayal. It's very hard on people.

I had a friend in college. His dad was very successful. He was in some business with another guy. His son told me this story. He said, "My dad got betrayed by his business partner, and my dad literally went mental." He said, "It would be the middle of the summer, and my dad would get home." This was back when men still wore full suits to work. He said, "My dad would run around the neighborhood in a full suit for hours until he got exhausted." He just didn't know what to do. It messes with people.

Some of you were betrayed a long time ago. You're like, "Oh, my dad *this*" or "My mom *that*, and I thought we were going to be together as a family. We're not." Sometimes it's a business partner. Sometimes it's a spouse. Whenever you're betrayed, you start to look at the whole past differently.

Here's another thing you think of when you're betrayed: "Am I an idiot?" That is something people think when they're betrayed, for sure. "Am I the type of person other people take advantage of?" So, when you're betrayed... Thankfully (I'll show you in a second), Joseph takes a godly response to betrayal. When you're betrayed, you normally have three options...three *negative* options, we could say.

First is to deny that it happened or deny that it's happening. That happens to people all the time. This is why, often, the wife is the last one to know her husband is an alcoholic. Have you ever noticed that? It's like, "How do you not see it? Oh, you *won't* see it." This is why it's so hard to talk to people about their rebellious kids. It's like, "Come on. Everybody in every environment sees this." "I don't see it." You *won't* see it.

Some people deny it. What's more common is people duplicate the betrayal. Strangely... I still don't fully understand this, but this happens in a marriage or in a dating relationship whenever there has been cheating. I think what happens is, usually, if there's cheating in a marriage, the marriage is not going very well, and then one of the spouses finds out the other spouse cheated, and they flip out (rightly so).

But then 10 percent of them, the part they won't show anyone, goes, "Good. I hated this marriage anyway. I've been looking for an excuse to get out of this." People are always looking for an excuse to be the worst version of themselves. "Great. You did this to me? I'll do it to you." People duplicate the betrayal all the time.

The third is to demonize, which is like, "Great. This gives me the chance to make the biggest deal possible out of this so that this person looks the worst and, by implication, I look the best," because there's no easier way to look good than to make somebody else look bad. This is why I tell people if something happened... I mean, take this to the bank. If something happens in your marriage, do not immediately tell your parents.

I've seen this. Something happens, and he or she calls the parents immediately. It's like, "Why did you do that?" Because the dark part of you would like your parents to hate your husband? They're going to take your side. They're your parents. You can't get that back. All of a sudden, you open this up. People do this all the time. I've seen people write the meanest things on social media about their exes. It's like, "I just have to demonize you. The whole world had better know it too."

Well, let's look at what Joseph does in verse 19. It says, "**And her husband Joseph, being a just man...**" Or you could just say a *good* man. "**...and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.**" Basically, can you love your enemies? I know it's hard. You're like, "I'm struggling to love my spouse. I'm struggling to love people who love me," so good luck loving your enemies. But if you could love your enemies, maybe you could want the best for them, even if you need to separate from them.

What's interesting about Joseph is he's going to divorce her. He's like, "I need my space. I can't stay in this relationship. There has been a betrayal. I need to move on. I need to start over." That's how he's feeling. But here's the other thing: he chooses grace over law. The law said she could have been stoned. He chooses to be gracious to someone even when he could bring the law toward them.

Here's what happens next. So, he's overwhelmed. It says this in verse 20. I want to spend a little bit of time on this, particularly with the men. It says, "**But as he considered these things...**" What are *these things*? Well, we don't know for sure, but Joseph got by himself, and he did what all of us do.

Usually, to some extent, when life isn't going well, we think about it. Right? You think about how brokenhearted you are over your prodigal son or where your marriage went wrong or why you are still underemployed and you're in your late 30s. Men do this all the time.

Let me encourage you with this. Joseph is doing something that some men *don't* do, which is actually think about their problems. Women's tendency is to overshare with everybody when things are going bad. I'm not saying all women do that. I'm saying that's their tendency. "I share too much. I share with too many." Men's tendency is to tell nobody, to immerse themselves in work, and to begin to self-medicate.

Joseph is to the point where he's actually thinking about what's going wrong. Here's what a lot of men do. They think about all of their problems, and they tell no one, so no one knows. For example...you know this...if Mom is not happy, everybody knows. Right? Everybody knows. If Mom ain't happy, we know. If Dad is not happy, no one notices.

By the way, most male depression is misdiagnosed as male anger and irritability. You have to understand (women do not understand this) men will sit and stew by themselves over how much they hate their life. They will be mad at themselves for some addiction they can't kick, and they won't tell anyone. They'll be so disappointed in their wife or so disappointed in one of their kids, and they won't know how to talk about it. They will feel so stuck financially, and they don't have anyone to talk about it with.

I want to encourage guys, because guys go to all of these dark places, and they start having suicidal ideation and all this other stuff. Then something blows up in someone's life, and you're like, "How did that happen?" It's like, "Dude, he thought about doing this for five years, and he told no one." So, I want to invite the men to find just one person, a person you love, know, and trust, a man who you can process your pain with and open up about the hard things in your life.

It appears that Joseph... Again, I'm using one verse. It appears that he's wrestling with all this. He doesn't have anyone to talk to. In this situation, an angel comes to him. Verse 20: ***"But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream..."***

By the way, God can speak to different people in different ways. He appears to Mary and Joseph, yes, with an angel...Mary during the day, Joseph during a dream. Just pay attention. If you're going through something, pay attention to how God might be speaking to you. Don't think your dreams mean nothing. It's like, really? So, you go to sleep for a third of your life, and whole worlds are built in your dreams, and you

think about all of these things, and there are stories, but it means nothing? Probably not.

So think about your dreams. Think about your circumstances. Sometimes God is using things to speak to you that you wouldn't even know. God might be using your kid. God might be using your spouse. God might be using your circumstances. We'll see in a minute. Yes, we know the main way God speaks to us is through his written Word.

So, he comes to Joseph and speaks to him. Now, he says the same thing to him. Look. ***"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.'"***

Sometimes I get up here... I'll just be honest with you. Actually, before I'm even up here, I'm praying and thinking, "How do I talk about this again, Lord?" If you haven't noticed, we've talked about confronting fear a lot. I would like to get up here... Today, it would have been neat to say, "You know what? He says, 'Don't fear' to Mary, but he has a different word for the guys." No. He has the same word for the guys.

Now, guys uniquely fear failure. Women fear failure too, but men uniquely fear failure. Men uniquely fear not having what it takes when the moment comes. There's an epidemic of this with young men. You know, "I don't know if I can get married. I don't know if I can stay married. I don't know if I can make enough money. I don't know if I could be a dad." It's all fear.

Now, Joseph is afraid of being misunderstood. Let me explain this. Because now you might go, "Joseph, what are you afraid of? Angel appears. Mary has been faithful. You've not been betrayed. Nothing to worry about." Joseph is like, "No, you don't understand. I am from a small town."

We know by the size of the well in Nazareth that less than 200 people lived there. Think about the most rural, smallest part of North Carolina, and then think it's very religious. Small and rural. What does that mean usually? It usually means religious. And what is the main idol in small, rural communities? No question, the family. Massive idol.

So, now you're in a small, rural community and you did family wrong. That's how they view it. They're either going to say, "You know what? With the wedding delayed and all this happening... Mary is pregnant already, but they haven't had the wedding..." They're going to assume one of two things. "You guys had an intimate relationship before you were married."

They're either going to say, "Mary, you had sex before you were married," or they're going to say, "Mary, you had sex outside of marriage with somebody else who wasn't Joseph." Here's what I'm trying to say. Listen for a second, because in a minute you're going to go, "This is very applicable."

Here's what happens. Mary and Joseph are afraid of being misunderstood, specifically Joseph, because no one is going to believe the story. No one is going to believe, "No, actually, it was an angel. It's a virgin birth. It's the Son of God. We're both virgins. We're just trusting the Lord in all this."

Here's what they're going to think. They're either going to think, "Joseph, you're crazy" or "Joseph, you're gullible." These are the two ways *you're* going to be misunderstood. I'll explain this in a second. People are either going to think you are insane or you are naive.

If you've never had anyone think you're either crazy or gullible, it's because you haven't had a deep spiritual conversation with a secular person. It doesn't matter. It could be about the virgin birth, or you could talk about, "Hey, a guy named Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and he lived 2,000 years ago. He lived a completely sinless life, and his righteousness could be ours."

It's like, "You have a sensitive conscience. This is your problem. You're too worried. Don't worry about it. Everything is going to be fine." No. We believe a guy 2,000 years ago died on a cross as the substitute for our sins. We believe in a real heaven and hell, a final judgment. We believe Jesus Christ is going to return from the sky at the end of time. You tell people that and they go, "You're crazy."

Or, "Oh, you believe like people used to believe before science. You're stuck in the..." It's a hard thing to have people... I mean, I've told you before I've had college students say things to me like, "You are oppressed and imprisoned by a book written by dead people." It doesn't feel good to have an 18-year-old say that to you, but that's exactly how they view you.

He's afraid of being misunderstood. He's afraid of the future, because what is this going to mean for his family? He's leaving the known for the unknown. He's like, "Okay. I wasn't expecting to be a stepdad. We weren't expecting to get married this early. Mary is going to need a bigger dress." Everything in his life is immediately changing. He's probably worried about Jesus. "How's *he* going to be? It's not just me. It's not just Mary. How is Jesus going to be viewed the rest of his life?"

I want to talk to you for a second. What do you do when you know you're going to be misunderstood? You have to build your character instead of defending your reputation. Your reputation is who people *think* you are. And you'll hear people. You

know, "Your reputation takes a lifetime to build and a moment to ruin." Your character is who you are internally.

Now, today, one tweet, one comment, one misunderstanding, and all of a sudden your reputation is ruined. Here's what happens, though. A lot of men do not build their character. They have very little good character, so they have to constantly protect their reputation.

Oftentimes, I'm like, "I do not want to know what happens in some homes in this church," because I feel like there are probably some dads and husbands who things have happened and they've said, "We will never talk about this. There are a couple of things that happen in this home that no one is ever allowed to talk about, because I don't have the character, but I need the reputation."

Look. When you come to Jesus, you give Jesus your sin. When you enter leadership, you give Jesus your reputation. You just have to go, "Okay. Lord, I'm going to build my character, and I'm going to trust you with my reputation." By the way, you also do this by scouring your own conscience.

I try not to talk about myself too much, but just as a practical application... As somebody who gets up here for 45 to 50 minutes every week and talks about a bunch of very sensitive things, and there are a lot of different people in here with different feelings about everything I'm talking about, and then they have a relative who has *this* issue...all this kind of stuff...

I've had to wrestle with it because (I hope this will make sense) there is no such thing as just preaching the Bible. People even say, "You know what I like about you, Pastor? You just preach the Bible." I'm like, "Nobody just preaches the Bible." If I just preached the Bible, I would just read the verse and go, "That's what God's Word is saying."

Then I decide to apply it. I decide to push on a marriage issue or I decide to call up young men or I decide to highlight singleness or I decide to talk about the danger of transgenderism or whatever it is. It's on those issues that certain people go, "Why are you talking about *that*?"

My conscience is clear. I love this church, and I'm aiming up. I'm only talking about these things because I love the people I'm preaching to, and I genuinely believe all this is for human flourishing. But I have to have that settled in my heart because, you know, somebody else *this*, and somebody says *this*, and somebody says *that*.

Here's the second thing that you can deal with being misunderstood. This is really important. Care the most about what those closest to you think. The reason people

care so much about what everybody thinks, a lot of times, is they do not have a good relationship with anyone close to them. One of the stabilizing forces in your life is, like, "I have a good marriage, my kids love me, I have good friends, I have a good relationship with my parents, and I have a good relationship with my siblings."

Well, just try to have all that. That'll take you a long time. But if you can have all of *that*, then you're like, "Who cares what the Twittersphere says about me or what my classmate for one class for one semester says? Who cares, because I've actually built and cultivated the relationships with the closest people in my life."

Now, if *they* think I'm wrong, I need to really check what's going on. If *they're* questioning my motives, then I really need to question my motives. If *they're* worried about my character or my reputation, then we need to talk. But if I can have *that* part right, I don't need to worry about the other parts. So, he tells him, "Do not fear." Then look at what he says. Verse 21:

***"She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' 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)."***

Really quickly, I want you to see one of the things the angel does for Joseph is encourage him with Scripture but with just one Bible verse. Do you know sometimes that's all you need? It's going to be 2026, and some of you are going to commit to reading through the Bible in a year, and you're going to get to Leviticus again. We're excited for you.

It's hard to read through the Bible in a year. It's hard to take four or five chapters a day and digest it. It's a good thing to do, and we need to get through the Bible and all that. I'm telling you, do not overlook how much God can speak directly to you through one short verse sometimes. This is one of the reasons we say, "Go to the Word of God for a word *from* God."

What you need to do when you're reading the Bible is just go, "God, what do you have to say to me today? What's going to jump off the pages of Scripture?" Depending on your season and stage of life, your struggle, your sins, your temptation, your relationships, your health, it's going to be something different. He gives him one verse from 700 years ago about a prophecy.

By the way, what he's also saying (this is hard for anyone who's suffering to hear) is "This is all part of God's plan." Do you understand that's what he's saying? "Joseph, I know you're going to be misunderstood. I know you're going to be a stepdad first before you get to be a dad biologically to your own kids. I know you're both young. I

know this is going to be unbelievably hard." He says that to him, but then he says, "I want you to know this is all part of God's plan."

By the way, this is what happens. When life is going well, you feel like you're a part of the world. You're like, "Of course." As soon as life is not going well, you feel like you're all alone, and you question everything. One of the things you have to believe is God is in control when it doesn't look like he's in control, and God is going to use everything, ultimately, for his mission and for my maturity.

He gives Joseph two names. Verse 21: ***"She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."*** Now, this is interesting. He goes, "Here's what you should call him: Jesus." But then later he says, "Because his name is Immanuel." Now, we've read the Bible enough that we're like, "Okay. I get it." But if you're Joseph, you're like, "What's his name? Is his name Jesus or is it Immanuel?"

Now, *Jesus* means Yahweh saves. If you look at verse 21, it says, "You will call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." By the way, here's what I want you to notice: Joseph doesn't get to name Jesus. It was a big deal in a patriarchal society not to get to name. In the Bible, naming is a big deal.

What does Adam do to all of the animals? In Genesis, chapter 2, he names them. Why? Because man has authority over the animals. Why does Adam (this can make certain women bristle) name Eve, his wife? Because he has authority over her. This is why still today, in most places, the woman takes the man's last name. It's the transferring of names. Why do moms and dads name their kids? It's a picture of authority.

Here's what's interesting. When Joseph invites Jesus into his life, the first thing he has to give up is one of his rights. "Okay. Yes. I'm saying yes to this. The first thing I have to do is to give up the patriarchal right to name my son...well, my stepson." See, what's interesting is all of us, to some extent, are trying to name Jesus instead of letting Jesus name us. In other words, we're all trying to control him, domesticate him. Most of us would like to think Jesus is a bigger, smarter version of us who mostly agrees with us.

We're told that Jesus came... It says, "He will save his people from their sins." Christianity is a rescue mission where Jesus came to earth to live, die, and rise from the dead in order to save us. See, the Bible says we cannot save ourselves. We can't be good enough. Good people don't go to heaven; forgiven people go to heaven. But you can see, even in our culture, how much everybody wants to be seen as a good person.

"I'm a good person. I only shop at Whole Foods. I reduce, reuse, recycle, and ride my bike." Right? "I'm a good person. I'm on the right side of the political issue. You can

tell by my yard sign." People put those in their yard to show their neighbors they're a good person. Maybe their neighbors don't get it, but that's what they're trying to do. "I'm the kind of person who puts up yard signs that say I believe these things. Look at how morally pure I am in the public square. Look at how I'm on the right side of history."

All of that... People don't even get it. They are crying out, "Please, would somebody see me as a good person?" because, secretly, they don't see themselves as a good person. Interestingly, it says, "He will save *his* people." It doesn't say he will save *all* people. One of the most offensive things you can say in a pluralistic, relativistic, multicultural society is "Everybody doesn't go to heaven."

Here's what the average American thinks they have to do to go to heaven. Are you ready for this? Die. They're not looking forward to that. They're not looking forward to the process of dying, but they think, "All you have to do to go to heaven is die." They're not justified by the death of Christ; they're justified by them dying. Christians have to say, brokenhearted, as we call people to Christ, "Everybody does not go to heaven. It does not go well for everyone forever."

Everyone wants to say, "My uncle is in a better place." Really? How do you know? Are you sure? Is that what happens to everybody? Everybody just goes to a better place when they die? Everybody? If that's true, then we shouldn't be sending any missionaries. We shouldn't be planting any churches. We shouldn't be wasting any time telling anybody about Jesus if everybody is okay already.

He says, "He will save his people from their sins." In other words, Jesus saves us from our sin, not from a difficult life. This is why Christians get bitter, because at some level they believe the soft prosperity gospel. "I became a Christian, and that means Jesus is going to save me from a difficult life." No. He's going to save you from hell, the wrath of God, and final judgment, but he's not going to save you from a difficult life. This is what you heard from Katy. She said, "I never thought this was going to be part of my story."

He gives a second name. Let's end with the second name. Verse 23: "***Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel' (which means, God with us).***" See, here's the thing. You can think about God's acts in history as God does something *for* us. That's virgin birth, sinless life, substitutionary death, and victorious resurrection. Jesus does something *for* us. He justifies us.

Then you can say Jesus does something *in* us by the power of the Holy Spirit. That's sanctification, becoming progressively and practically and, often, painfully more like Jesus. Then you can say God also wants to do something *with* us. God is *with* us.

*Immanuel* means God with us. Here's what it means: God gets his hands dirty. God gets involved. God enters the situation.

There's a word that's very, very popular today. It's so popular that before the 9:00 service, I was back with the worship team (they hadn't heard my sermon yet), and a person on the worship team used this word. I'm like, "Everybody uses this word." It has become a buzzword in the last couple of years.

People debate whether it should be used and whether it can go negative. It's the word *empathy*. See how long you can go without someone using the word *empathy*. Go listen at work. Just go have a conversation. Someone is going to be using the word *empathy*. And people debate.

To say it positively, it means to try to genuinely feel and understand what another person is experiencing. The rich need empathy for the poor and white people for Black people and Black people for white people. It's kind of like, "Hey, I'm not in your situation, but I need to think about what I would do and how I would feel if I was you."

Here's the interesting thing about what we're told in the person of Jesus Christ with "God with us." You might ask the question...*Does God have empathy?* Does God really understand? At one level, when you ask that question, "Does God understand what I'm going through? Does God care?" you have to go, "Well, since he's God, there's nothing God doesn't understand," but maybe language limits me here.

One thing God did not do before Jesus Christ came into the world is he did not know our experience *by* experience. He hadn't lived the life as fully God, fully human. Here's what I mean by this. You could literally ask the question... You could say, "Whatever you're going through..." We talked at the beginning about people who are suffering.

You might say, "You know what? This Christmas season, I'm struggling with my singleness. I'm struggling still being single, and I'm struggling being a single adult." You might think, "Does God know? Does God care? Could God even know what that feels like?" Do we remember that Jesus Christ was single his entire life?

Somebody else might go, "You know what? I don't even know. Could God ever understand what it's like to lose somebody?" Well, we don't know all that happened, but somewhere between age 12 and age 30, Joseph appears to die. So, Jesus lost his stepdad, maybe during his teenage years. He later loses his good friend Lazarus. Does Jesus know what it's like to lose somebody? He does.

"Does Jesus know what it's like to be betrayed?" Well, you know *that* story. That's the story of Judas. "Come on. Does Jesus know what it's like to be misunderstood? Kyle is

talking about being misunderstood. Could Jesus ever understand?" Read the Gospels. At one point, his family didn't understand him. He was misunderstood by the religious and the political leaders of his day.

"Okay. Does Jesus understand what it's like to suffer and die, and maybe to do so at a young age and to do so while your parents are still alive?" Yeah. His mom was still alive. Yeah, he suffered and died at a young age. The great encouragement in Scripture is God is *with* us.

So, when we go back to feeling misunderstood, I just want to encourage you. God is with you even when you feel misunderstood. I want to encourage some of you. Maybe your word for 2026 is to be brave. What would it look like? By the way, notice, you will always admire a bold person. You'll even admire a bold person on the other political aisle. You'll be like, "At least you said it. At least you told us how you felt."

Some of you need to be willing to be misunderstood by your parents because you're raising their grandkids differently than *they* would. In 2026, you'll go, "It's okay. I'm embracing it. I'm going to be misunderstood." Some of you need to be misunderstood by your kids because you're going to make decisions for you and your family based on the vision and values of Scripture that their friends and their friends' parents don't all have.

Some of you are going to have to have the courage to be misunderstood by people who think you're being judgmental, but you're actually being loving. You're talking to them about Christ.

See, here's what happens with Joseph. In verses 24 and 25, here's how the story ends. ***"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."*** He marries Mary. He names Jesus. He obeys God.

Here's what Joseph does, and this is where some of you are. I talked to a lady after the 9:00 service. She had tears in her eyes. This is where she is. Some of you right now are living a life you did not expect. That's Joseph's story. He's a couple of years older, so he's 17 or 18 years old, and he's realizing, "All right. I'm all in, God. I'm all in. But this is not the life I expected."

Something we're all going to have in common, to some level...everybody in here and everybody down in Lexington... Here's what we're going to all have in common: at some point in our lives, we're going to have a life we didn't expect. Some of you go, "Man, I expected I'd be married by now." Some of you can say all of the things Katy said. "I never thought this was going to be part of my story."

Some of you go, "Nobody has ever been divorced in my family, ever, until me." Some of you go, "I just don't get it. We raised all of these kids, and one of them is a prodigal. That is not part of the story I thought." Other people go, "I always thought we were going to be able to have our own kids. We actually got married at a young age, and I thought we were going to be able to have kids. I never expected that my future might be a future without my own biological kids."

Some of you have a child, and you go, "I love my child, but I was not expecting to be raising a child with a disability." This happens in all... And if it's not you right now, you're going to know somebody. In those moments, you need to know the two names of Jesus. You need to know the name *Jesus* and the name *Immanuel*.

You need to know that God saves, you need to know that you're headed to heaven, you need to know that God cares, and you need to know the truth of *Immanuel*: God is with us. We serve and worship a God who not only suffered *for* us but who suffered *with* us. Let's pray in his name.

Lord, right now in this room, certainly...I heard some people tearing up over here as we began to talk about it...there are people whose life is just not what they thought. They've even stopped dreaming. It's too painful to hope for something. They play the numbers game at birthdays. They play the numbers game at holidays.

There are some people in here who have to avoid certain situations because it's too painful. They can't come for a sermon on marriage because it hurts. They can't show up the weekend they know parent commissioning is happening; it's too hurtful. Lord, we pray for those who are grieving. We pray that they would see the future inside the grace of God.

There is so much hope. There is so much grace for those who find themselves with a life they didn't expect. We continue to genuinely believe, Jesus, you are the God who suffered for us, and you are the God who will suffer *with* us. In your name we ask, amen.