

Uncertain Joy (Matthew 1:23)

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[0 : 00] Matthew chapter 1. Matthew chapter 1.

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to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. 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.

[2 : 48] 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.

And now there's the memory verse. Behold, the virgins shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means God with us. 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 his son, and he called his name Jesus.

Thank you, Eden, and a wonderful reciting of the memory verse as well. So it can be done. We do look forward to it when we continue to store up God's word in our heart as well. That was a wonderful pepaha. A pepaha is an introduction, right? So to your backstory, who you are, where you come from. And so some of you, you were thinking, wow, that's a long list of names. But imagine if you were, you know, one of God's people. You've been hearing your history of familiar names and faces, your longings of a hope to come.

And so it's a wonderful reading. And today we're just going to focus on the one verse, which is our memory verse. So let's pray, and then let's hear what God has to say through particularly this memory verse. Mighty God, we humbly rely on you now. Bless us as we hear from your word. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Thank you for those of you who have been filling out the wishes on the wishing tree. I actually saw a wishing tree yesterday, and it was actually at this place.

[4 : 42] Can you read that? What does it say? Okay, well done. Okay. Yeah, a wishing tree. Lots of wishes on that tree. And maybe a little bit different from what some of you have been wishing for Christmas this year.

Look, I can sympathize with the popularity of Ikea. And actually, you know, as Christians, James 1 verse 15 says, every good and perfect gift comes from the Father of lights. All right. So maybe, except for the most people who work at the warehouse, I think there are lots of people who are really grateful, been grateful to head to a store like this, right?

Pretty thrilled about this mega store up the road. Feels like it represents a long-awaited hope for some people. Who's been to Ikea before? Who's had a wonder? Okay. Yeah. All right.

Homeware tabernacle, isn't it? It's almost like a temple, you know. You walk your way in through to the Holy of Holies, grab what you need, go to the priest at checkout, and then get a hot dog at the end of it as well.

All right. There's even free childcare, I've been told, though I've not tried it. So whether Ikea represents a shopping paradise or an introvert's nightmare, one thing that's for certain is that Ikea probably had zero meaning to those who first heard Matthew's gospel, who first heard that Bible verse of the month.

[6 : 05] Today, I just want us to reflect, what would it be like to live with hope, right, and in a word that was not just Ikea, right, or whatever brand name is that catches your fancy this season, but of this other word buried in plain sight here in verse 23, Emmanuel.

Emmanuel. Emmanuel. What would it be like if our country thought deeply, not about Ikea, not about the warehouse, not about wherever else you get your hopes from this season, but Emmanuel, which has translated God with us.

Welcome to the world of Matthew 1.23, of Matthew's gospel. If you're uncertain this season, all right, that there is joy to the world, well, this word Emmanuel should be rich and meaningful to you, should be something that we should lean into more deeply.

All right, here is a name worth cherishing, Emmanuel, God with us. Verse 23, we're going to talk about this word Emmanuel in three parts.

Verse 23, actually, just for a bit of context, is what one author calls the most amazing verse in the Bible. And there's too much I think we could unpack from this, even this precious verse, but I want to just hone in on that word Emmanuel and briefly share what three things that God teaches us from this name.

[7 : 37] So firstly, please know that Emmanuel means that Jesus is God with us. We see that in the verse itself. Matthew gives a translation to this word, as it were, right?

So they will call him Emmanuel, which means God with us. And this is referring not just to a God who is, you know, abstract, but referring to Jesus, who's just been introduced to us through an amazing family history and an intimate backstory.

Emmanuel means that Jesus is God with us. Not so long ago, I worked in a nine-to-five job as well, like many of you. This was in Highbrook. And it just so happened that actually one day I was just at the desk, just trying to check my emails, looking like I was working super hard.

Of course I was. Just so happened that actually the Prime Minister of New Zealand was scheduled to visit that day. Now, the first sign you know that the Prime Minister or someone important is coming is when a serious-looking bodyguard steps into the corridor of your work office and then scans it.

And then once the coast is clear of any threats, then ushers, you know, the important people through. You could not hide the arrival of the Prime Minister. But as we heard last week from Pastor Johan, how did unexpected joy come into our world?

[9 : 05] It didn't come with diplomatic protection services, did it? It didn't come with a social media shout-out. It was just Jesus, born distantly related to King David, born to the most humble, most obscure origins.

Only shepherds who watch the flocks at night coming to celebrate. Look with me again to verse 20 and have a look again.

After he had considered this, this is Joseph, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, Joseph, son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

She would give birth to a son, but to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. Here, an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph and says, Give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.

For Joseph, listening in here, and every descendant of Abraham, the name Yeshua helped to remind them what the word originally meant, actually.

[10 : 16] Every time they heard the word Yeshua, it would have reminded them of this truth, the Lord saves. That's what the word means in the original language. And the way he will save a broken, sinful people is precisely what we celebrate at Christmas time, isn't it?

God himself must come to earth to do the saving, to live among us, to die for our sins, and then rise again victorious over death.

You see, the Bible's a big book, but the ongoing question through the Bible story, through Israel's history, we sang a little bit about it in the second song, was this, God, will you send someone to save us?

Come, Lord. Come and save us. Come and be with us. Can you deliver us from our slavery?

Because, actually, Israel went through all kinds of things as a people. And the trouble is, though, every time they were physically saved, right, you know, rescued from Egypt, returned from Babylon, they were often still spiritually lost, or they still needed help.

Selling themselves to other gods like unfaithful lovers, finding security in their wealth, their armies, but not the Lord. And throughout history, God sends his presence at times.

[11 : 35] He sends special people like Moses and Joshua and David. But finally, at this moment in history, he becomes Emmanuel, which means God with us, clothed in human form.

And this is incredible. This is life-changing. This is life-changing. And think about Mary for a moment, the mother of our Lord Jesus, someone who lived in extremely uncertain circumstances. I think if joy to the world rang out on the radio around her, she would not be singing along, right? What's this? A small-town girl pledged to her husband, confronting perhaps the certain shame of an unplanned pregnancy.

Her whole community, as it were, right? Not even, you know, welcome in their own land. They're actually living on occupied territory, right?

At this time, the land of Israel was ruled over by the Roman Empire. You see, that's why this memory verse, verse 23, is more than just a feel-good Christmas verse.

[12:44] It's an exclusive claim that Jesus is God himself with us. It's an exclusive claim saying that God is here with us, right?

And Jesus is that God. Not Caesar Augustus, right? The Roman emperor who ruled the land at that time. And not any other foreign nation, king, ruler that has threatened and harmed God's people in the hundreds of years before and after.

No one can claim to be God except God himself here. Please be assured, there is no earthly ruler or king more powerful than Jesus.

And here he is God with us. He is here to turn our uncertain joy to certain hope. Please remember that this Christmas.

Emmanuel means that Jesus is God with us. Secondly, let's remind each other, Emmanuel means that Jesus is also God over us, right?

[13:48] It's very easy at Christmas time to go, you know, get this picture that Jesus is just a baby in a manger, right? Very cute, right?

Someone that you would draw a picture of and give cuddles. Emmanuel, right, reminds us that this is God over us.

Now, why? Well, let me explain to you. Anyone know what the word El in Emmanuel means? It's actually the Hebrew word for God, El. Forget El Nino, forget any other words that have El in them. The first name we encounter in the Bible actually is the name of God. And it's actually spelt Elohim in the original language, right? Genesis 1, 1, right?

Some of you know this verse very well. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. This is where Emmanuel first shows up, in a sense. Now, look, the Hebrews were not just the first people to use the word El to describe their gods.

[14:51] Just like if you talk to someone who's not a Christian and you ask them what they mean by God, they might give you a very different answer to the God of the Bible, right? It's the same, right? Back in those days, other cultures in the ancient Near East, speaking related languages, also spoke of El, in a sense, but in their own gods, in their own ways of thinking.

But what the Bible declares from the start is that there is a God over us, right? There's a creator of heaven and earth. The God of Abraham, David, Moses, the God of you and me is the God above all powers that claim to be divine.

There's no contest at all. Some of you maybe have contact with, you know, friends and family who worship in different ways. They might have different traditions. You need to know this, that the word Emmanuel reminds us Jesus is God over us.

There is no contest. For this Bethlehem baby to also be God with us is to face the fact that we are accountable to this God, this man.

It's not just an ordinary child. And actually, we see this in the very nature of his birth, right? He's not made by human effort. It's one of the key things that we've celebrated and defended over years as Christians.

[16:16] Jesus was not made by human effort. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of a virgin. Once upon a time, Abraham's wife, Sarah, was barren but was able to give birth through God's miraculous intervention.

And this is a next level intervention, isn't it? A virgin wife giving birth to the Son of God. Giving birth to one who is a baby and yet at the same time is the maker of the universe.

As one songwriter put it, the baby in her womb was the maker of the moon. Can you comprehend that for a moment? Jesus is God over us.

The way that Emmanuel, Jesus, is presented is meant to make us realize how small we are in comparison. It's a time then, Christmas, to make Jesus the center of our worship.

What we long for, what we love. Christmas is then a time for us to tell our friends and family that he is the missing piece in the puzzle.

[17 : 27] That he's who you really need in our lives. And it's also a time for us, as believers, to reflect. Is Jesus actually the center of my Christmas scene?

Or if I was honest, you know, actually Jesus is more tucked away in the corner, right? Like all that stuff that you've put away that haven't tidied until your holidays have begun.

Is that how Jesus is for you? Maybe Christmas is a good time to reflect and ask, have I allowed Jesus to be God over me? Is he God over my studies?

Is he God over my work? Is he God that covers my schedule? What needs to change in my life if not? What should 2026 look like so that in more ways I'm second and Jesus is first?

God over me. Christmas is also a good time as well to ask, where in the world is the true God, this God, not yet worshipped and adored?

[18 : 36] Now, actually, it was less than 200 years ago when a bunch of missionaries began to translate the Bible into Chinese, right? They were convinced that billions of people who lived in China at the time needed to hear the good news of Yesu in a language that they understood.

And it wasn't an easy job, right, for a bunch of people who lived from Western countries to come into the East and to try and understand their culture and then tell them what they needed to hear through the Bible.

In fact, some of them actually got stuck at this very memory verse, right? Remember what the memory verse said, right? Anyone remember? It says, the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son and they will call him Emmanuel, which means God with us.

Okay. When these translators got to the word God, they got stuck and they started to argue amongst each other. How should we say, how do we say the word God in our language? And actually, that's why even today in Chinese Bibles, there are actually two ways to say the name God. It's hard work, isn't it? But they persevered because they trusted and lived for Jesus as Lord over their lives. You wouldn't spend all that time and effort if it wasn't worth telling people that Jesus is God over us.

[20 : 03] So this Christmas, pray for God to raise up more gospel workers, more missionaries for the harvest. If you don't know who we support as a church, as missionaries, find out.

Grow an active relationship. Meet people who have been on the mission field, who are praying to go there. How willing, though, are we ourselves to follow in the footsteps of these men and women? Last month, I had a kind of classmate's catch-up with people that we were at Bible College together. It was a privilege to hear about some of the ways that God has been using us six, seven, eight years on from leaving college.

One couple, Jared and Bethany, they have kids now. They're living in a remote village in Vanuatu, where the people there have never had anyone even write down their language.

Can you imagine that? Let alone translate the Bible. Their language hasn't even been written down yet. Does that grieve you? Would that move you?

[21 : 11] Pray for God to raise up more gospel workers. And some of you already know, right? In much of the world, in places like Central Asia, in the Middle East, in Japan and North Korea, it can be impossible in some places of these countries to meet someone who is a follower of Jesus.

There are millions who live surrounded by false gods, who do not know that Emmanuel means Jesus is God over us and should be worshipped, who bow down to gods that cannot save and cannot heal.

Some of you already feel this tension. Maybe you are at a high school and you are the only one in your class that goes to church. Pray for God to raise up more believers, more gospel workers, more people who are compassionate for the lost.

And let us cling to Jesus as God with us, yes, but let us also live for Jesus as God over us as well. How shallow our days would be if all we lived for in 2026 was a bunch of meatballs and other uncertain joys. All right? Rather blessed are those who follow the humble road of Jesus.

[22 : 28] God above us, from the manger to the cross, then to glory. In Revelation 14 it says, you know, his people, the saints are the ones who follow Jesus wherever he goes.

May that be us, right? Because we believe that Emmanuel means that Jesus is God with us, he's God above us. And finally, very briefly, let this verse here in Matthew 1.23 remind us that Emmanuel means that Jesus is God for us.

Have a look at verse 23 again, okay? What do you see around the start and the end of verse 23? Have a look again. All right?

There's quote marks, okay? There weren't quote marks in the original manuscripts probably. This just helps us to realize that actually we are not the first people to hear these words spoken to us. And nor were Matthew's first readers the first people to encounter this verse. This tells us that this is a quotation from another part of the Bible. Experts do debate exactly how this quote matches what's been quoted, all right?

[23 : 45] But where it says through the prophet, it's talking about a verse in the Bible in Isaiah chapter 7, verse 14. What's clear from the original context there is that this verse was originally written as a word from the Lord to a particular king, King Ahaz.

Just a somewhat picture on the left. Now, King Ahaz, you know, might resemble some of the, you know, world leaders of today.

Okay, someone who seemed very powerful but was always terrified that they would lose what they had, right? Always a bit paranoid, actually, about what other people thought of them.

And in particular, when Isaiah writes to him, prophesies to him, he was terrified that the neighboring Assyrian kingdom was plotting to invade. And amidst all the panic and uncertainty around him, Isaiah the prophet brings a promise.

And he says, Isaiah 7, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Emmanuel. And actually, in the context afterwards, it's followed closely by more promises, right?

[24 : 57] Isaiah 8, verse 8, the Lord promises to break and shatter the far countries for God is with us. If he can say that to a foreign, you know, about a foreign country, if he can say it to a king that wasn't very good, he can say it to you as well.

God is for you. He can break and shatter what you can't. He can deal with your deepest fears. How can you be sure?

Well, look to the Christmas story. Look out for the miracle birth. That is a sign for you, that God is with us, he's over us, and he can be for you as well.

Now, Matthew's point is this, that this prophecy to Jesus' ancestor, Ahaz, right? If you listen carefully, Ahaz was in that long list of names, right? This prophecy is now fulfilled.

It's fully real in the virgin birth of Christ. Please don't forget, what makes Christmas special is not presents or the feasts or the holidays.

[26 : 09] What makes Christmas special is that Jesus is truly, fully God with us and God over us. And so don't be frightened by what you can't understand.

Don't be scared of uncertain days. Jesus is God, and he's God for you. And don't get me wrong, though. Those who reject Jesus as Lord cannot claim this promise.

This is not a blanket promise for every person. You have to put your faith in the King of Kings and Lord of Lords to really embrace this promise and to accept it.

God, even back then and now, he's angry at our sin. He has to punish it. It's what our sins deserve. But if Jesus is God for us, that is a wonderful reminder that God has done something remarkable. He has poured out his just anger for sin upon his son, the babe of Bethlehem, at the appointed hour on Good Friday.

[27 : 14] Right? Jesus is God for us. He laid down his life for those he loves. Do you believe this? Will you accept that?

Will you accept this incredible gift of Christmas? If you do accept this, and if you are one with Jesus, you place your trust in him.

The father sees his son for you, and that's when he says, welcome home, child. Welcome to the family. On our first Sunday here at PCBC, a bunch of the leaders, they were so kind, right?

They gave us a welcome gift at the time. What do you get someone who, you know, you haven't really met before, right? And back then, there was no Ikea. They couldn't just go and get a voucher or anything, right? So we got this beautiful pot plant.

Small. But to us, it was a special sign that meant welcome home. Of course, there were lots of other ways we were loved and welcomed.

[28 : 15] This was back in 2023, of course. Back in a time when our kids were younger, when I had fewer worry lines in my forehead, and when PCBC English was a place just full of opportunity and potential.

And lots of people kept saying, God is with us. God is with us. Two years later, actually, I got a little bit, you know, neglectful.

The pot plant was there, but then I forgot where it was. And then when I noticed it, it started to, like, overgrow and outgrow the plant. And then so I put the plant in a new one, but then it wasn't holding its shape.

I don't remember the day it happened, but actually finally the pot actually broke. But the plant still grew. Just spread in lots of different directions.

It's kind of, yeah, it's different now, isn't it? And maybe this past year, some of us have felt a little bit shattered as well, in a sense.

[29 : 20] Maybe even the term welcome home doesn't sit right with some of you. I hear you. But what if PCBC was meant to be more than just a welcome home?

What if, actually, Emmanuel reminds us that God is with us, sure, right? But God is over us, so actually our lives need to change and mature in Christ.

And if God is for us, wow. Who else needs to know this incredible news that Jesus died for sinners? Who are we taking this to?

What if we're also meant to be not just a welcome home, but a lighthouse for the lost? A refuge for the weary? A training ground for the next generation?

Can I encourage you, church? As we go on tour the next couple of Sundays, let's remind each other. We're doing more than just visiting the cousins or the relatives.

[30 : 20] We're doing more than just testing our patience. We're scouting out our future. We are befriending unreached people, actually, who walk through these church doors.

We just don't know them yet. We're growing a heart for the lost. We're growing a heart for those who need comfort and encouragement. We may not share the same worship time.

But we are related. We are connected. And we are part of the same mission field. So let us use this time to pray and prepare for the next phase of what God has in store for us.

I wonder if we could tell each other more, right? Welcome home, yes. But also to tell each other, you're now entering the mission field. And the ruler of this mission field is Jesus.

Not just a baby, right? He's now bright. He's shining. He's risen again. And he is resurrected. And he says, go and make disciples of all nations.

[31 : 30] Baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And I'm with you always to the end of the age. This Jesus, Emmanuel, is coming soon, right?

Lord Jesus, he's God with us. He's God over us. And he's God for us. And we're to make disciples of all nations in his name.

He's coming soon. And when he does come, that blessed day, there's no more need for us to be worshiping, meeting, gathering here and now.

Because we'll be with Jesus. We'll be with all our brothers and sisters in the Lord. But until then, we have uncertain joys to turn away from. And we have unfinished business to be faithful with.

Let's pray. O come, O come, O come, Emmanuel. Lord Jesus. The God of our lives.

[32 : 34] The King of the universe. Thank you for coming to be with us. Thank you for the chance this Christmas to celebrate that. And Lord, we tremble before you.

You are God over all. And we must worship you and give you our lives. There is no other God who can save. And blessed Lord, you are coming again.

And you died for us. And so, we belong to you. We should listen to you. We should tell people the good news about you.

So, would you empower us to do this as we head out to our mission fields? Whether it's to long, you know, distant relatives that we see once a year at Christmas.

Whether it's when we go on holiday to different places and meet random strangers. All who need to hear the good news. Would you send us to them? And would you give us your Holy Spirit empowering to tell them that Jesus is God with us.

[33 : 44] God over us. And God for us. We pray all these things in his mighty name. Amen.