

## God With Us

*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). - Matthew 1:22-23*

When Matthew wrote his account of Jesus’ life, the readers he had in mind were Jewish Christians: that is, Jews who had come to believe that Jesus was the Messiah, God’s Son.

Imagine for a moment how strange it must have been for Jews to believe this. Following the Torah, they would have held firmly to the teaching that God is one: there are no other gods besides him (Exodus 20:3). Yet the events of Jesus’ life—his teachings, his death, resurrection, and ascension—brought many Jews to the conclusion that in the person of Jesus Christ, this one true God had come to them. After all, before he ascended into heaven, Jesus made this divine claim: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. . . . And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:18, 20). Total power and timeless presence—these could belong to God alone.

This means that Matthew’s telling of Jesus’ birth (Matthew 1:18-25), must be read as the story of how God became a human being. In the language of the Apostle John, “The Word became flesh” (John 1:14). There’s a ton of theology packed into that phrase—and it can get unwieldy to say it every time. Thankfully, there’s a convenient handle to help us grip it: the word *Incarnation* (*in + carne* [flesh]).

What does Matthew teach us about the Incarnation? We can unfold it in four simple statements: (1) The incarnation was a real event. (2) The incarnation happened in a certain way. (3) The incarnation has a purpose. (4) The incarnation has an outcome.

### **1. The Incarnation was a real event: “The birth of Jesus Christ took place” (Matthew 1:18)**

God’s becoming a human being belongs on the timeline of world history. It stands in continuity with the discovery of iron, the founding of Rome, Caesar’s crossing of the Rubicon, Columbus’ sailing the ocean blue, the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and your previous birthday. Many people, however, insist that it is wrong to hold this at all.

Religious myths, after all, don’t exist *within* human events, but only *above* them, just as heaven is above the earth. No one cares, for example, exactly *when* the Egyptian god Osiris was killed and came back to life. No one wonders who was emperor when the phoenix exploded into flame and re-emerged from its ashes. These are timeless myths to help people understand the world, teach them to behave, and, perhaps, give them hope for the future.

But with the Incarnation it is different. With the Incarnation, “myth has become fact.”<sup>1</sup> The timeless has entered time. The ideal has become real. What gives us meaning, hope, and instruction, is not a “once upon a time, far, far away,” but, “In the days of Caesar Augustus” (Luke 2:1). The kingdom of heaven is in our midst (Luke 17:20-21).

This teaches us a great deal about the heart of the Christian message, the gospel. It is not primarily a philosophy of life or a set of rules to keep. It is a Rescue, and Christ is the Rescuer. It teaches us not only how to find meaning in life; it declares that Life Himself has come to us, and that we must receive him (John 1:4-14).

There are a couple points worth making to apply this truth that the Incarnation was a real event. First, this must mean that *the world matters*. This might seem obvious to us in a world still haunted with Christian beliefs, but it is becoming less obvious to people. In his 1994 book, *Pale Blue Dot*, Carl Sagan writes, “Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves.” According to Sagan’s worldview, we cannot know we have worth; the very best we can do is to assert it blindly into the answerless chasm of empty space. If the Incarnation is true,

---

<sup>1</sup> In his essay, “Myth Became Fact,” C. S. Lewis puts it this way: “The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact. The old myth of the dying god, without ceasing to be myth, comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history. It happens—at a particular date, in a particular place, followed by definable historical consequences. We pass from a Balder or an Osiris, dying nobody knows when or where, to a historical person crucified (it is all in order) under Pontius Pilate. By becoming fact it does not cease to be myth. . . . To be truly Christian we must both assent to the historical fact and also receive the myth (fact though it has become) with the same imaginative embrace which we accord to all myths.” It is important to note that Lewis does not use the word “myth” to mean a falsehood, but rather a story by which we seek to understand what life is all about.

however, the answer has come and help has arrived. In the words of G. K. Chesterton, ours is the “visited planet.” God does care about the world—so much that he came to it.

Second, this must mean that *you have value*. Yes, the Bible teaches that we are sinners, but this is very different from teaching that we are worthless. Rather, it is our worth as human beings that makes our sin so appalling. The Incarnation tells us that God cares deeply about human beings, since “the Son of man came to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10).

**2. The Incarnation happened in a certain way: “The birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way” (Matthew 1:18-20).**

Since the Incarnation is a real event, it must have taken place in a specific region of the world at a specific place. This is what Matthew goes on to tell us about, and here the details become even more stunning.

Both Matthew and Luke clearly teach that Jesus was born to Mary who, at the time, was a virgin. Matthew sees this virgin birth as the true fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy, “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son” (Isaiah 7:14). Many scholars have argued that Isaiah’s word for “virgin” could mean “young woman,” not necessarily virgin. But this does not change the fact that Matthew’s account insists in ways other than the word “virgin” that Mary was indeed a virgin: “before they came together she was found to be with child.” Luke is likewise emphatic, telling us that Mary herself asked, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” (Luke 2:34).

The Bible teaches the virgin birth, and this is enough for us to believe that it happened this way. But beyond this, we can see how it fits into the intricate beauty of God’s plan to rescue his fallen creatures. In Matthew’s list of Joseph’s ancestors (Matthew 1:1-17), he includes a wicked king named Jehoiachin whom God cursed: “Record this man as if childless, a man who will not prosper in his lifetime, for none of his offspring will prosper, none will sit on the throne of David or rule anymore in Judah” (Jeremiah 22:30). If Joseph was the biological father of Jesus, then Jesus himself would inherit the curse barring him from the throne of David. But by passing over the “normal” way a person is conceived, God was fulfilling his promises that there would be a forever King.

**3. The Incarnation has a certain purpose: “You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21).**

Why was the Incarnation necessary in the first place? The answer goes back to another major theme throughout the Bible: human beings have failed to live up to God’s standards of goodness. This failure is called “sin,” and its consequence is separation from God. What is needed is a human being who can actually live up to God’s ideals *and* bear the penalty for those who fail to. The Incarnation is the answer to that problem: God came as a human being, lived as every human should, yet suffered as every human deserves. That is how Jesus saves his people from their sins.

**4. The Incarnation has a certain outcome: “‘They shall call his name Immanuel,’ (which means, God with us)” (Matthew 1:23).**

The outcome of the Incarnation is the fulfillment of God’s central promise to human beings: to dwell with them forever. Matthew concludes his account of Jesus’ life with this same theme: And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). The God who was born among us is with us now and will be with us forever.

## **Application Questions**

1. In what ways does the idea of the Incarnation as a historical event distinguish it from other religious “myths”?
2. In light of the Incarnation, what makes the Christian message different from a philosophy of life or a set of rules?
3. Considering Carl Sagan's perspective in *Pale Blue Dot*, how does the truth of the Incarnation counter the notion that our existence is insignificant in the vast cosmos?
4. How does the belief in the Incarnation challenge the idea that humanity is inherently worthless, especially in the context of acknowledging sin?
5. How does the Incarnation address the fundamental issue of our failure to uphold God’s standards?
6. In what ways does your understanding of God being “with us” influence your perception of God’s involvement in your daily life?