

Divine Intervention

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[0 : 00] I'll please turn back to the passage that we read, Matthew's Gospel chapter 1.

I think one of the biggest questions we can ask, and it's maybe one of the biggest questions you have asked because you're here in church, is whether or not God exists. But I think the next biggest question maybe when we ask does God exist, is what kind of God is He? And specifically, is He the kind of God who gets involved in our lives?

Because maybe some people's idea of God is that, well, there might be a God all right, but we can't really know too much about Him because we can't trust the Bible, or He might exist all right, but He's got nothing to do with us because He's not really interested.

That's a view that a lot of people have, and maybe it's the kind of thing that you think. But I think that the Bible shows us a God who very much is involved in the world, that He is made. And so He doesn't make it and leave it, but He makes it and cares for it, despite and kind of in amongst all of the fallout of the fall, all of what has happened in human history because of sin and how that has come in and corrupted the creation that God has made. Despite all of that, God is involved deeply, intricately in life. And we get two really clear examples of this in this chapter. I think as you read through these opening chapters of Matthew, and as we think about the whole idea of just the Christmas story, it's such a clear example of divine intervention. You know, we use that phrase divine intervention flippantly sometimes, I think, is the kind of thing you can hear when you may be watching us, the sports on, and a team is getting hammered. And the commentator might say something like, well, the only thing that's going to save them now is divine intervention.

So you know, I throw away phrase to mean that they've got no hope and they need something really special. Well, if we think about it, divine intervention is remarkable. God getting involved in human affairs. And if we take it one step closer, that means God getting involved in our lives. In this chapter, in between chapters one and two, we get two clear episodes that I want to look at of God getting involved. And that I want to suggest is what this whole story hinges on. It's what it's about. God is deeply involved in human history.

[2 : 47] Two episodes, first with Joseph, and the second with the major I. So I want to just look through these two examples with you together this morning. So Joseph, how does God, how does God deal with Joseph and how is God involved in Joseph's life? What's Joseph's scenario?

What's facing Joseph? The story may at one level be very well known to us, but let's just think for a minute again about the kind of scenario that he faced and what life threw up to him at this point in his life. Well, Joseph is married to Mary. Sorry, Joseph is betrothed to Mary. And that's a very clear difference, isn't it? Because in the situation that he was in, it may well be that he had been, he was aware that he was going to have married Mary for a long time, maybe even since he was a child, it may have been arranged that he would have married Mary. But at this point in time, he's betrothed to Mary. Now there's a difference here. He's not married to her yet. But to be betrothed to somebody, you can only get out of that arrangement by divorce. So they're not married, but it's a very firm thing that they're together. But the difference with being betrothed is that they're not living together and they're not sleeping together. So when Joseph finds out that Mary's pregnant,

Joseph, a respectable religious Jew, finds out that the woman he's betrothed to is pregnant. That's a really big thing for him. That's something that would stop him in his tracks.

That's definitely going to have an impact on his life. Now there's a very severe way of dealing with that if somebody was found to be pregnant out of wedlock. But we get something of what Joseph is like in this chapter because we read it as you go through this chapter. Joseph, her husband, was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace. Even though this sudden kind of, as it were, calamity had come right up in front of his face, he didn't just lash out and think, right, well, I'm going to make sure everybody knows you're the one to blame here. I'm going to get you in trouble. He wants to do things well. And so he plans to do things quietly. So briefly, that's his situation. That's a pretty major situation for him to have faced in those days. It would still be a pretty major situation for us. He'd be pretty confused. He wouldn't know what's going on. And maybe even more so because of what happens next. God intervenes. God comes into his life directly and gets involved. So what do we see God doing? You see this from verse 20 onwards. In the middle of all this, God comes to him in a really remarkable way in a way that probably you or I have not experienced. He comes to him, read in verse 20, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. Now, God wants to do when he comes into Joseph's life is he wants to explain the situation and he wants to give Joseph something to do. So he explains things.

He says, this is a work that I am doing. This is a miracle. The baby is of the Holy Spirit. This is something that God is doing. The baby that Mary is carrying is of the Holy Spirit.

[6:14] So I want to explain things. I want you to know this. I want you to know what I'm doing. But I also want you, he says to Joseph, to do two things. You'll see what he gives Joseph to do in this passage as we go through from verse 20. Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife. Don't divorce her. Don't cut her off. Don't throw her out of your life because she's disgraced you. Take her home to be your wife. Now is the time to get married.

And he gives him another thing to do. He says in verse 21, she'll give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus. So marry Mary in the time she will give birth and you are to call him Jesus. Now, these two things are important because both of them, and this helps us to understand something of why God said these things to Joseph. And it also helps us something to see something of why Matthew used these because Matthew's gospel was something that was in some ways aimed at people from a Jewish background. Both of these things had to do with the legal status of a child. So if Joseph takes Mary to be his wife and if he, when the baby is born, names that baby, he's, as it were, saying that he's the legal parent of the baby Jesus. So at no point does this suggest that he's the biological parent.

It's quite clear that this is God's work. God's involved here. But Joseph is to be the legal parent. So God speaks into his life and he gives him these things to do. Now, at a very basic level, sometimes we can find these things just remarkable, unbelievable. We read something like in verse 20, an angel of the Lord appears in a dream. But if that stands out to you, it's something totally ridiculous and out of character. And like, where did that come from? That just seems so unbelievable. We need to understand that this isn't new in terms of what the Bible consistently teaches us when we go through the Bible. As you read through the Bible and as you see the way that God works time and again through the pages of the Old Testament and into the New Testament, this isn't so bizarre. We think back to an example like with Jacob in Genesis chapter 28. In Genesis chapter 28, Jacob is traveling.

At this point in his life, he's not close to God. Jacob's life has to change and he has to come to know God as his personal savior. At this point, he's still kind of got God at arm's length. But in chapter 28, we read that God reveals himself to him because Jacob has a dream. And in that dream, he sees angels. We read here of a dream and an angel of the Lord. And in what happens to Jacob, we read of a dream and we, he sees this amazing vision of angels ascending and descending from heaven. And I want to also just read a couple of verses because of what God goes on to reveal about himself. He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth. But then it says in verse 13, I'll just read these verses to you. Then above it stood the Lord. So he doesn't only see the angels. He has this comprehension that God is there. Again, God is coming into his life. And look at what God says. I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you in your descendants the land on which you are lying. All people's on earth, he goes on to say, we blessed through you in your offspring. I am with you and we'll watch over you. This is an amazingly personal intervention. So God comes into his life and makes promises to him a real personal level for him to know and to take hold of. Now that's important as well because of the name that God has given for Joseph to call the baby. The name he has given him, calling Jesus. When we break down the name, this name, the root of the name means Yahweh or the Hebrew name for God will save. So what is God revealing here? He's using this angel, this spirit being as a messenger. We know of angels as messengers from God at special times and in certain ways to come into human history. He's using this angel to come in to say, I want you to name your son Jesus because God will save. And this isn't new. This is a great thing for us to understand about what the Bible teaches us, that this is the consistent message that God has been giving us and that God was giving his people throughout the Bible, throughout the pages of history. He's always been saying to his people, I am your God, I will save you. You need to trust in me. And so here when we get to the announcement of the birth of Jesus, God is saying, and this is how I will do it.

This is how I will save through my son Jesus, who I am sending to be a savior. And it's really important for us to take that in and to personalize that as well. And so we don't just objectify Jesus as some old picture of a baby in a manger. This was the announcement of God, the save the sun coming as a savior into, into the world and into all its darkness and into all the problems that people faced then and that we face now. This is the way that God intervened. So this is good news for us. But I want you also just to notice Joseph's response just tells us quite simply. Again, a lot of this narrative is quite in many ways quite quickly told. What does it say of Joseph in verse 24? This is this kind of amazing vision that he'd had this incredible personal revelation of God. When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him. He simply obeyed, simply obeyed.

[12:32] He trusted the Lord. He took Mary home as his wife. And it says at the end of the verse, and he gave him the name Jesus. So despite the social challenges that he would have faced, Joseph heard and knew God speaking to him and he obeyed. He had this understanding of God as the savior, as the one who wanted to come into his life and to save him. Now, I don't think he would have understood everything of what was going on here. Everything of what it meant for this baby that he was going to take legal parentage of to be the savior that he obeyed according to what he knew. And so that's a question for us, isn't it? According to what we know of the Lord and of what he's spoken to us and what we read in his Word and of what he tells us and of what he wants us to know that he is the savior in whom we need to trust. The question is, and in many ways, in the face of all the societal pressure we might face, the embarrassment of being a Christian, the pressure that we may face from family even if they think we shouldn't confess ourselves as a Christian, are we going to hear and obey and follow this savior? So episode one is an example of how

God came in very personally to this man's life, this announcement of the savior. The second episode briefly, the visit of the Magi in chapter two. Now, this is a very different example, but I think we can learn a lot from it. So the scenario with these folks, the Magi, what do we read at the start of chapter two? This is a bit of time after Jesus was born, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem. There are a few facts. So we have these people, the Magi, we have the fact that they came from the east. They traveled a bit. They came to Jerusalem. They had kind of had their interests stirred a wee bit because they had seen this star and in some way they put two and two together and figured that it was going to lead them to this Messiah figure, the savior figure, because they had some awareness of the Jewish teaching of a Messiah who was expected. They were looking out for this kind of news.

And so to see this star in some way in their practice, this directed them. So this is the scenario we get with these guys. Now, again, that's not our experience, is it? That's a pretty remarkable experience that these people had. Let's not just put this into kind of picture book, baby Jesus style thoughts. Let's take this as some people's real experience and understand what they had to face at this point in time. They come from the east. Now, Magi, a lot of people would think that they're in some ways astrologers. They're interested in the heavens and in the signs. So they're looking up. They're looking to see signs and spiritual issues and receive direction in that way. Some people would say they came from Babylonia. But the point is that they're not Jewish. They're not they're not as it were covenant people who are expecting their own personal covenant savior to God's people, the Jews. They come from the east. They travel. So they must be pretty excited about this.

They go out of their way to come and find out what's going on here. And God uses this because he intervenes in their lives and he intervenes really in terms of just governing the whole of this episode. I think when you read these chapters, it feels like you get a big picture view of God is like the orchestrator or the director of this whole of all of these whole scenes. He intervenes in a couple of different ways in their lives, which have great importance for the story. And the first is just through this whole incident with the star. Providentially, he uses who they are and where they're at in their lives, searching the heavens for signs. He uses that to direct them. So when we read this and we think, okay, he's using these people called the major, a lot of people think that astrologers. Does this mean that he's sort of okaying astrology? I don't think so at all. I think what's happening here is that God is coming to certain people where they're at with their experience in their lives and he's moving them. He's using that to move them towards himself. He uses this star to bring them into the reality of the birth of his son, Jesus Christ. So the first example of how God intervenes is a kind of in a providential way, in a more general way, but he also intervenes in their lives directly. You'll see if we move on a wee bit in chapter two, chapter two, verse 12, as they've come to Jesus, as they've encountered Herod, as he's tried to trick them because he of course wants to just murder Jesus and get rid of him because he's a threat. God then intervenes again, verse 12, and having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. Now, what's amazing about this is that there are five such examples in this passage of God intervening in a dream. God is deeply involved in all of what's going on here. So this is no accident.

This is no mistake. This isn't random. God wants this to happen and he's involved in it all in ways that we maybe don't understand them, which seems strange to us. But at specific times, God used these ways to act. So he comes into their lives and he brings these people from a different culture into the direct experience of seeing Jesus. So we learned that God is involved. But I want to get, I want to see certain things about this, things that are amazing. I think when we look into who these people were, look at the way that they respond when they come to Jesus. They announced, and Derek, I remember last week or Neil, I think it was, of the service was saying how they came with the direct express intention of worshipping. They came to this baby because they believed him to be something more than just a baby. They believed him to be the sent one from God, the Messiah. They came to worship him and they were good to their word. In verse 10, look at chapter two, verse 10, they saw the star. They were overjoyed on coming to the house. They saw the child with his mother

[19 : 28] Mary and they bowed down and worshiped him. That's not a normal reaction to a baby, is it? They recognize that there's something more here, that they recognize that there is something in this baby who is to be worshiped. And of course, our experience is to know who this child is and to know all that the Scriptures then reveal about Christ. And for us, it's even more the case that when we begin to even think about who this child was and is, the appropriate response for us is to worship him. It's to worship him, to worship King Jesus because we know why he came. We know all that he went through and we know that now he's seated at the right hand of God. So it's absolutely appropriate for us to worship him. And that is good news for us at Christmas time and every day. Every day he is King, every day he is Lord, every day he is to be worshiped. It's appropriate because we also see in this passage, we've seen in chapter one, God is told Joseph to call him

Jesus. Why? Because he will save his people from their sins. But look also at what he says about him, which makes it appropriate for them to worship him. Verse 23, the Virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son and they will call him Emmanuel, which means God with us. Now there are two things going on here that are life changing for us.

Call him Jesus because he will save his people. That has always been God's message to broken us who need that message in all of the brokenness in our hearts, in all of the ways in which we get so careless about our sin and our lives and how often we go far away from God. He will save his people from their sins. But also why? Because God with us. Because God who made us and who sees how far away we can go from him and how careless we can get about who he is as our maker and our creator wants to restore that relationship so that we may worship him and have fellowship with him. Now that tells us something amazing about who God is and what he is like. He sent his son to be the Savior so that we may worship him and so that he may be with us and that we may worship him. Emmanuel, God with us.

Of course Jesus, we know this wasn't just this particular time. It's not like Jesus was with these people then. Oh well that's good for them. Jesus was here 2000 years ago.

Jesus told his disciples that he would send his spirit, the counselor, the comforter to be with his followers and he said some of the last words to his followers, I am with you always. And so the truth that we have this morning is that our Savior came, was born and died for us and promises to be with us. And that is the good news that we have, God with us, God our Savior. So it's a totally appropriate thing for these people to worship him and it's an appropriate thing for us to worship him. And we need to ask, I need sometimes to ask the Lord to help me to worship him because of my sinful heart and because of the distractions that come my way to see again who he is and all his glory and to worship him. One other thing about the major I remember I said that they traveled, they were from the east. So they came quite a distance. This was a thing that they went out of their way to do. Contrast that with the people that Herod gathers around him. You see in chapter two Herod obviously wants to do away with Jesus and he goes to his people, his spiritual advisors, Jewish advisors, people who knew the scriptures and he knew of the promise of a Messiah. And he says, tell me about this, give me some more information. You see this in verse four, chapter two, when he called together all the people's chief priests and the teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was. And they know Bethlehem and

[23 : 59] Judea, but they don't go to worship. They don't go out of their way even though they were so much closer than these major from the east. They were so much closer and they knew about Jesus, but they didn't bother. They didn't recognize him. They didn't go and worship him. And it's possible for us to know everything about Jesus, lots of things about Jesus. It's possible for us to be so close and yet so far from the gospel, isn't it? And to continue to hold Jesus at a manageable arms length. Please don't hold Jesus at a manageable arms length. He's to be with us. It's what we need and it's good for us to worship him. So I think when we think about this time of year and the Christmas story, what is great for us to know is that God gets involved. He's not a God who doesn't care. He's not a God who ignores us or who stays at a distance from us. He gets involved in human history. And this story is in many ways one of the classic examples of that.

I read a great story this week on the church's website. One of the churches up north, I believe, some of the folk in that congregation have responded, I guess, to the community needs that they have. They've seen that there are people in their community who maybe don't have anywhere to go on Christmas. They don't have any family or friends or whatever. And they've decided simply to open their church and to put on a big meal and welcome them.

So what they've done is they've seen a need. They've seen a genuine human heartfelt need and they want to respond. And they want to go to these people and get involved and welcome them into their lives. And that's a great example. But again, please think of the way that God is what he is like when he looks at us in all our massive need spiritually.

He gets involved. He cares for us and he provides us with exactly what we need and he wants to be with us. I read one more example. I read an article this week by one of our ministers in a national paper and it was a good article but he finished with a lovely little paragraph which I love. I'm just going to read it. Speaking about the Christmas story, he says this, it's not a human story to remind us how wonderful humans are and how we should all get on well together. It's the story of God's answer to the question, if you love us so much, what have you done to help us in our darkness? His answer is I gave my one and only son. And I think that is worth celebrating. That's for us to celebrate. Let's pray and ask the Lord to help us. Heavenly Father, you're worthy of all our praise and all our attention and you're good for us. You're what we most deeply need and we praise you at this Christmas time, this season, which means so many different things to so many different people. Thank you for the good news of Jesus. Help us to take it. Help us to take you and to want to be with you. May your spirit work in all of us so that we respond to the news that is good, which is that you got involved. You came to us in our need and you sent your son

Jesus and his name we pray. Amen.