

Christmas: The Challenge to Authority

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”

These are the words that we find on Jesus’ lips as at the close of the gospel according to Matthew. That is an audacious statement by anyone’s standard. Think about it! Who says such things? Let’s be clear here, Matthew doesn’t record Jesus saying, “I’ve got authority in matters of morality!” He doesn’t record Jesus saying, “I’ve got authority in matters of religion.” No, he says, “All authority in heaven and on earth...” That doesn’t leave out much. This astounding claim insists that there is not a single corner anywhere in all of creation that does not fall under Jesus’ jurisdiction. He rules the whole show. He’s got all the power.

Now, if I stood up and made that claim you’d think I’d lost my mind! And if some quack like Adolf Hitler stood up and said these words you’d think, “Quick, someone, stop this madman before he actually gets his hands on a little power.” We live in a democratic society. No one could campaign on that platform. “Give me all authority – all of it – and I’ll run this country for you! I’ll fix what’s wrong. Give me the final word on every decision and I’ll make things right!” Such a person might get some airtime but no sane, democratically minded person would ever dream of casting their ballot for him. And if by some bizarre set of circumstances such a person actually made it into power, we’d either stage an immediate coup or head for the nearest border crossing before it was too late. Someone having all the authority is rightly a very spooky proposition.

And yet, here we are, some 2000 years after Jesus made his audacious claim and believers in Jesus will claim without apology, “Yes, he has all authority and I’m so glad he does!” And they wouldn’t take that stand out of fear. No, they would implore you to believe as they do that this proclamation of Jesus, far from being terrible news of the rise of a world tyrant, is instead the most glorious, good news imaginable. They would say, in fact, that to live under his authority is what life is all about – real life, abundant life!

This is the first of three messages I will present under the theme of Christmas. Christmas, of course is about the birth of Jesus and what we’re going to do in these three lessons is have a look at the Christmas story from basically two different angles. In the first two messages we will look exclusively at the gospel according to Matthew in an attempt to embrace the Christmas story the way he tells it. In the last message we will explore the theme of the celebration of Christmas via Luke’s gospel.

This lesson I’ve entitled, Christmas: The Challenge to Authority. Authority is a prominent theme in Matthew’s gospel as we might guess just by looking at his final scene. But that’s how the story ends in Matthew. How does it begin? Well, it begins with authority too. And the way it begins sets the stage for the rest of the book. For how the story of Jesus begins tells us immediately that something strange is happening; that somehow the authority of Jesus arrives in the world along a very different pathway than

we're used to seeing authority arrive on. There's nothing in the beginning of Jesus' story that smells at all like the rise of a tyrant. There *is* a tyrant in the story but it's not Jesus.

So let's jump into the story of the birth of Christ as Matthew presents it. The first words out of Matthew's mouth as he begins his gospel ought to ring with authority to our ears; they ought to naturally connect us to the words Jesus spoke at the end of the gospel, "All authority in heaven and on earth have been given to me."

Matthew 1:1 (NIV84)

- 1 A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham:

Now I'll confess that at first hearing that sounds a little flat compared to, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." Matthew 28:18 sounds like a declaration. This sounds like... well, an introduction to a boring genealogical list. But what Matthew says in his opening line is anything but flat to him who has ears to hear. Matthew is not saying, "Now there was this fellow named Jesus Christ and here's a list of his ancestors." No, what Matthew is saying, "Here is Jesus the Christ, son of Israel's great King David, descendant of our father Abraham." The word 'Christ' is not to be heard as a name but a title. It's not as if Mary and Joseph's last name was Christ. Christ is the Greek version of the Hebrew Messiah, and it has huge royal overtones. The meaning is "Anointed One." And if you're of Jewish descent, as Matthew's readers were, this line will not pass you by without notice. In Jesus' day the entire Jewish nation was banking on the hope that was bound up with their dreams of the coming Messiah and Matthew is saying, "Here he is!"

Talk of the Messiah (talk of the Christ) is what stirred hope in the heart of a nation that lived under the rule of Rome. As the Jewish people stared in the face of Rome's oppression it was Messianic hope that kept them alive; it was that hope that fueled their faith, compelling them to persevere, for one day the Christ would come and all that they were dreaming of would arrive. The glorious 2nd Psalm captures this sentiment wonderfully.

Psalms 2 (NIV84)

- 1 Why do the nations conspire
and the peoples plot in vain? (*The nations who plot and scheme do so for naught.*)
- 2 The kings of the earth take their stand
and the rulers gather together
against the LORD
and against his Anointed One.
- 3 "Let us break their chains," they say,
"and throw off their fetters." (*The Gentile's are rejecting the rule of the Messiah.*)
- 4 The One enthroned in heaven laughs;
the Lord scoffs at them.
- 5 Then he rebukes them in his anger
and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,

6 "I have installed my King
on Zion, my holy hill." *(Note that the Anointed One is here called King.)*
7 *(The King speaks)* I will proclaim the decree of the LORD:
He said to me, "You are my Son;
today I have become your Father.
8 Ask of me,
and I will make the nations your inheritance,
the ends of the earth your possession.
9 You will rule them with an iron scepter;
you will dash them to pieces like pottery."
10 Therefore, you kings, be wise;
be warned, you rulers of the earth.
11 Serve the LORD with fear
and rejoice with trembling.
12 Kiss the Son, lest he be angry
and you be destroyed in your way,
for his wrath can flare up in a moment.
Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

Authority? This Psalm and the hope it expresses is all about authority!! The Psalm makes a mockery of anyone – any king, any power, any authority who dares to stand opposed to the Lord, the God of Israel and his Anointed One, the Messiah, the King.

And so, when Matthew in his opening line mentions Jesus the Christ the son of David you can be sure he didn't think he was getting ready to lull anyone to sleep with a long, boring genealogy list. Even the genealogy list itself, boring thought it might be to us, was a call to attention to any Jew with ears to hear. It said to them that this was their story, their hope and you can be guaranteed it put no one to sleep. It's only our ears that are deaf to all of these glorious echoes; only our huge disconnect from the Jewish world of the first century, which could permit sleeping through this list.

So let us be absolutely clear... Matthew in his opening line is intending to place before us the One who in the end of his gospel will declare that he has all authority – Jesus the Christ. Matthew's not whispering about some figure from the past who might have had something to say in his day and maybe you ought to give him a hearing. No, Matthew is telling us, right out the chute that this Jesus, whose story he is about to tell, is the one who rules the world; the one who has all authority! And this is where the story about the baby Jesus belongs. It is in this setting, couched between Matthew's glorious opening statement and Jesus' profound closing one that we find the strange story we call Christmas.

And I do mean strange. Everyone knew the hope; the whole nation was eager for the Lord to finally show up and get the job done. But the way he gets it done; the way we move from the glorious opening remarks of Matthew through the story to the place where Jesus himself claims all authority is the most intriguing thing of all. Even in the genealogical list itself there is something strange happening.

At first glance it's just a long list of names rehearsing who begat who all the way from Abraham to Jesus. But there is something very intriguing that Matthew does within this list. He inserts the names of

four foreign women (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba); four non-Jewish women whose intriguing and sometimes scandalous stories do belong with the story of Israel but often don't get much press.

Matthew gives these ladies some airtime and in so doing seems to insist that things are not going to unfold like people were imagining they would. The Israel of Jesus day, let us remember, was not at all accommodating to foreigners in her midst. She was an occupied nation; foreigners reminded her every day how she was not free; Israel of Jesus' day lived under the heel of the mighty machine we know as Rome. Consequently, they dreamed of the day when they could give the foreigners the boot once and for all. And yet Matthew introduces foreign names into a Jewish genealogical list while at the very same time speaking of Israel's hope through their Messiah. You can bet that anyone of Jewish descent who was hearing this story of Jesus for the first time was paying attention now.

This theme, that the hope of foreign peoples was bound up with the hope of Israel, by the way, becomes a prominent theme in the ministry of Jesus. He understands that Israel's calling by God was not for her own sake but for the sake of the world. And when Jesus insisted, like he did in Matthew 8, that many would come from the east and the west (non-Jewish folk), and would sit at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Israel's patriarchs) in God's coming kingdom while the sons of the kingdom are tossed out into the darkness, he's preaching the very sermon that Matthew was pointing to in the genealogical list. "Our story includes them," says Matthew, "and you best get on board with that."

Perhaps another reason Matthew inserts the names of four women into this list is that he's revving up to introduce us to a fifth, Mary. Now Mary is not a foreign woman, but like some of these other ladies she, through the call of God in her life, is going to find that she's got something in common with them – scandal.

Matthew 1:18–19 (NIV84)

¹⁸ This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

So put yourselves in Joseph's boots guys. This is your fiancé. You haven't slept with her out of deep respect not only for her but for the God you serve with your whole heart. But now here she is – pregnant. Ancient people may not been very scientifically enlightened, but they knew where babies came from. What would you do?

And ladies put yourselves in Mary's shoes. You're a good woman, a righteous and godly woman. And you have made your pledge to Joseph. And yet one day, in this mind-blowing moment, God, through the Holy Spirit, puts a child in your womb. How are you going to explain this to your fiancé? "Well, yes, I am pregnant, but it's not what you think! God did it!" I don't imagine anyone tried that line before.

How would you like to sell that story to your fiancé ladies? And gentlemen would you buy it? Well, Joseph, evidently, had a hard time swallowing it and proceeded to break off the engagement. He moved

to divorce her, the text says. In their culture engagement was a very serious matter that required a formal divorce to call it off. But he was a good man and, although I'm sure his head was swimming, he determined to do right by his fiancé and not make it into a huge public spectacle.

Right off the bat here in the story of Christmas we have to ask, "What was God up to?!" Isn't this a strange story? Why would God script the story like this? Was there not some way that he could have placed a child in Mary's womb without subjecting her to such potential ridicule and scandal? God could have made some glorious appearance to Mary in a very public setting, say in the temple or during synagogue one Sabbath – a choir of angels and a booming voice from heaven, "You will bear the Christ Child." But that's not what happened. God appeared to her in private and Mary was left to bear the weight of a scandal. Why would God do that? Isn't it a strange thing for God to subject a person of faith to such a call?

Now Joseph was a good man and felt compelled to protect his own integrity, but he was not a rash man and he didn't act immediately upon his convictions.

Matthew 1:20 (NIV84)

²⁰ But after he had considered this (divorcing her), an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

Well then, gentlemen, that would make it a little easier to swallow wouldn't it? But this young betrothed couple still had a burden to bear didn't they? What are people going to think? Surely some nosey old aunt is going to do the math and draw her conclusions. And God let Joseph and Mary sweat it out didn't he? Did they tell the entire community? Would you? Which would you prefer, the charge of insanity or the charge of promiscuity? It seems that this little God-incident virtually sealed the deal on one or the other. What kind of a story is this Christmas story? Once again we should be on notice that the story might not unfold in any predictable fashion.

But be assured that Matthew doesn't seem to be bothered by these questions. He not telling a story of a young couple caught up in a scandal. That story is drowned out by the glorious story of the God of Israel at work in the midst of this strange circumstance to redeem and rescue his people through his Christ. And if we're students of the Old Testament we shouldn't be surprised that God often works in very strange ways. The angel didn't show up just to provide Joseph with an explanation as to why his fiancé was pregnant; the angel showed up to let Joseph in on what God was up to.

Matthew 1:21 (NIV84)

²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

The name Jesus is the Greek version of the Hebrew name Joshua and means, Yahweh saves. Matthew has taken pains to place the story of Jesus in a very Jewish context. We begin with a Jewish genealogy and in these words from the angel it is Israel's salvation that is highlighted. "He will live up to his name and will save his people from their sins." This is precisely what the nation Israel in this day was longing for.

Sometimes in our day when we talk about being saved from our sins we have a very particular way of perceiving what that means. We understand it to mean that somewhere inside I know that I'm a sinner and have done some bad things and I want God to forgive me. Now there's nothing wrong with that idea in and of itself but it can leave us with the idea that God forgiving my sins is a very personal and inward experience without much connection to the outward circumstances of my life. The Jew understood forgiveness in a much more holistic sense. Yes they understood internal and private forgiveness but on another level the idea of longing for forgiveness of sins meant that they as a nation recognized that they had screwed up royally and had earned the judgment of God. That was why they were being oppressed by their enemies; that's why Rome had her by the throat; that's why life was ugly and injustice and oppression ruled the land. They were reaping what they had sown. Talk of receiving the forgiveness of sins therefore was not something disconnected from their present situation. Forgiveness of sins was directly connected to the hope of the nation for freedom, justice, truth, peace and the like. They weren't hoping for a Messiah that only offered some private internal type of forgiveness. Their longing for forgiveness was a longing that God would rescue and redeem them as a people. I think scholars are right on the money when they picture the Israel of Jesus' day as longing for a second Exodus. They're in slavery and they're looking for freedom. They would have thought it very strange for someone to say that their Messiah was not offering that but merely personal, private, internal, forgiveness.

Matthew's gospel will bear out the truth that it is forgiveness which encompasses the whole of our beings that is on offer through Jesus. Jesus does not merely offer us some internal putting of our souls right with God while the world goes to hell in a hand basket. The forgiveness he has on offer involves the putting to rights of the entire created order; God's people being fully vindicated. What Jesus has on offer is justice on a global scale, the tyrants getting their due and the oppressed finding freedom and hope. The forgiveness of sins on offer through Jesus Christ is of the variety that compels, as Israel's prophets would say, the rocks and trees to sing and clap their hands. Have a listen to some of the best of our Christmas Carols – that's what they're singing about! And the Israel of Jesus' day was not wrong to long for this in their coming Messiah.

Now that kind of forgiveness requires authority and not just a bit of it!! But Matthew has more to say.

Matthew 1:22–23 (NIV84)

²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" —which means, "God with us."

We haven't time to explore the details of this prophecy from Isaiah, only to reflect for a moment on what Matthew's conclusion is. Jesus will be called Immanuel – which means, "God with us." We might

ask, “What would it look like if God showed up?” Matthew says that it would look like no one ever imagined it would; it would look like what the prophet pointed to. It would look like the birth of this child, Jesus. Matthew is saying something absolutely astounding here. This child conceived in Mary is God With Us!

Talk about all authority! Jesus, according to Matthew, is nothing less than God who has taken up residence with us. If that leaves your head spinning, know that we who have been Christ’s for a lifetime are still wrestling with the implications of what that means. Who is God that he would somehow be fully represented in the person of Jesus? It is interesting that at this point in his gospel Matthew doesn’t pause in a long side bar and attempt to address the issue of how Jesus can be God with us. What he offers instead is a glimpse into the life of this one we call Jesus. And this, my friends, is what will carry weight with you, it is the story of his life that will gain traction in your soul, not a theological explanation.

And so in our next lesson we’re going to turn the page in Matthew’s gospel and explore in detail what it looks like to have God With Us in the person of the Christ child.