

(mis)Understanding Jesus (Part 2)

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Davis

[0 : 0 0] In our morning services at the moment we are doing a study that has got two titles. The main title is understanding Jesus and we're going to be looking at several key moments in the life of Jesus in order to better understand who he is and why he's come. But the other title that our series has is misunderstanding Jesus and it's got that second title because at the same time when we look at these events in Jesus we want to try and identify the ways that he's been misunderstood both by people in his own time and by people today. So today our focus is going to be on Matthew 1 21 where we read the words that the angel spoke to Joseph saying, she will bear a son and you shall call his name Jesus for he will save his people from their sins. And we're going to think about how these words were misunderstood then and how they're still misunderstood now. As we do so it's good to get our bearings so we'll just quickly go through exactly what the verse is saying. We can just put up the wider passage from 18 to 23. I won't read it all but I just want you to notice that verse 21 is coming in the middle of the angels message to Joseph. As we read when Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant he thought to himself, well the best thing to do is to break off their engagement and that would allow Mary to quietly have the child and avoid what would have been a public scandal of getting married while expecting a baby. And I think it's important to recognise that Joseph's plan was well intended but it wasn't what God wanted. So

God intervenes and an angel appears to Joseph and explains the situation and tells him what to do. And you can read and see that he makes it clear to Joseph that Mary's pregnancy is not some scandal or unexpected disaster, it is actually the work of the Holy Spirit. And we come down into verse 21 and the angel explains to Joseph saying, Mary will bear a son, that's what's going to happen, this is what you need to do. You shall call his name Jesus. Now that name Jesus is the Arabic and Greek equivalent of the Old Testament name Joshua, so same name Jesus, Joshua, same name, it means Yahweh saves. Now if anyone's unfamiliar with the word Yahweh, it's the name revealed in the Old Testament for God, God's covenant name.

It used to often be translated as Jehovah but Yahweh is generally considered to be a more accurate rendering and it means I am who I am, it's the covenant name of God and the name Jesus means Yahweh saves. And that's why the angel then explains for he will save his people from their sins. And in doing so it's going to fulfil the promises that God made in the Old Testament as you can see in verses 22 and 23. Simple, yes? All sounds very straightforward, doesn't it? Well, that would seem to be the case and yet it's true that all of this is very easily misunderstood. How was it misunderstood back then in the days of the New Testament era? Well, that's what I wanted to think about first. If you look at the phrase, if you put it up on the screen, you can see that you can split it up into three bits. So first of all, you have a subject and a verb, he will save. So we can highlight that first part, there should be an arrow there, there's our subject and our verb. Then you have an object who will be saved, his people. And then you have an adverbial phrase giving more information about this saving. It's from their sins and so we can split it up into these three chunks because all three of these were misunderstood in Jesus' time. And we're going to go backwards today, we're going to start at the end and work our way through. So let's think first of all about the phrase from their sins. In the early first century, the Jewish people were longing for the Messiah to come. As we've often said for the Jews at this time, they had this amazing history, especially in the great days when David and Solomon were king. But in the years since, things had got progressively worse, they'd gone badly wrong, and the Jews had suffered a lot. So I was going to remember that the Old Testament is not a story of success, it's primarily a story of how God's people failed. But not just in the New Testament, in the Old Testament was their suffering and difficulty. In the period in between the Testaments, what we call the inter-testamental period, there had been huge turmoil for the Jewish people. They were part of the territory that was conquered by Alexander the Great in

333 BC. So it's an easy one to remember, 333

BC Alexander the Great came and conquered the territory of the Persians. And so the land that the Jews had had and enjoyed was fought over after Alexander's empire was divided among his successors. And so they were ruled by different people and different forces competing to have control over their territory. For a short spell in the middle of the inter-testamental period, there was a successful rebellion against the Greeks, and the Jews were ruled by a family called the Hasmoneans. So you may sometimes hear about that, the Hasmoneans ruled over the Jews between around 167 and 63 BC. And it all started with what's called the Maccabean revolt. It's all super interesting and I'd love to go into detail, but we don't have time. But just in the middle of the Testaments, you've got the Greeks coming, you've got the Jews rebelling, a short time of kind of independence, but the whole thing came to an end in 63 BC when the Romans came and conquered Palestine. So there was conflict, turmoil, suffering, and at the same time Greek influence was getting stronger and stronger and was drawing people away from their Jewish roots. By the time the angel appeared to Matthew, the Romans were in full command, and although the Jews had freedom to practice their religion, their national freedom had been taken away and the high points of the past seemed like a long, long time ago. Their only hope now was that one day God's Messiah would come. But because of the situation that they faced, their hope was that the Messiah would save them not from their sins, but from the Romans. Now there was a sense in which the Jews would have seen a connection between the two because the fact that the Romans had taken over was to them a sign of their failure and was seen by many as a punishment for the nation's sin in the past. And so consequently some people thought, you know, the more obedient we are, the more likely it will be for the Messiah to come. But the goal became more and more politically focused. They felt oppressed by these rulers, they wanted rid of them, and to them the Messiah became more and more thought of in terms of a military leader, someone who'd lead a rebellion against the Romans and reestablish an independent Jewish nation.

Matthew is telling us that's not why the Messiah is coming. That's not what he's going to save them from. Likewise, they also understood the his people part. So if you ask the Jews what the his people meant, the answer would be, well, us, obviously, they saw it in reference to themselves. And again, that's not completely wrong because at one level the Jews did have a very unique place in God's redemptive plan. But the risk was that their national focus was becoming very exclusive and other nations were not included. So much so that some Jews, they saw the Greek influence, they saw the Romans, they hated it and they went into closed colonies and very often near the Dead Sea where they just like kind of almost like a collective monastery. That's an anachronistic illustration. But you know what I mean, just a blocked off, cut off from everyone. And of course, it was a community like that where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered last century. So there's this idea that the nations kind of want to keep separate his people. That's us. And for that reason, the Greeks and other [9 : 44] Gentiles, they were enemies, Romans included. And even their neighbors, the Samaritans, who had Jewish ancestry were still viewed with great hostility because they weren't pure Jews. And they mixed with other nations. So for them, if anyone was his people, then it was the Jews. But again, Matthew's telling us that that's not correct because he's just dropped some massive hints earlier in this chapter that this idea is not the case. Because if you go through the genealogy, one of the really interesting things, we read all these names and we think, you know, oh, this is just a whole load of names that we don't know much about. But Matthew's genealogy is fascinating because at one level, he points us back to Abraham, who was always going to be a blessing to all nations. But even more strikingly, Matthew just dropped some women into this genealogy. And that was very, very unusual.

And you see the mention of Tamar and a Rahab and a Ruth and of the wife of Dirae, very, very unusual to mention women in a genealogy in those days. But what's even more unusual is the fact that they're all foreign. They're Gentiles. Matthew's pointing us to the fact that his people is something much bigger than what the Jews of the first century would have thought. And then thirdly, they also misunderstood the he will save part because they saw that very much in terms of a step back in time. So we want the Messiah to come to save us and we want him to come and make everything like it was. Salvation was seen as getting back to how things used to be, being restored to the great days when they had their own nation, their own king, their own freedom, and God himself was present among them in the temple.

But again, this was a misunderstanding. God's plans are way bigger. Now I want to just pause there for a wee moment to say that in all of this, there's a big lesson for us. It can seem like a different world and ancient history and almost you think, well, that's really interesting, but not that interesting, Thomas. But it's actually really relevant to today because there's a lesson here that's crucial for us all. The Jews who held these kinds of misunderstandings were falling into the trap of thinking that what matters most is what is happening to me right now.

Their expectations of God, in other words, were shaped by the immediate realities of the moment they were living in. It was the right now that was the big problem and that was what shaped everything in terms of their expectations of God. And we can do exactly the same thing. It's so easy to become captivated and dominated by what we expect right now.

That can happen in lots of different ways. It can happen at a national level. You think of politics, you know, who is in power right now. That can absolutely dominate people's minds and their thinking, but it can be on a much more small day to day level as well.

[13:10] Sometimes everything is about what job we have or having the right kind of house or whether we get to go on the holiday that we want to or not or even something like whether or not we've got the right clothes or the right hair or the right phone. You think, I don't have this. I've got to have it. I've done it so many times in my life. There's so many times I've seen something I want to buy and I've thought, this is the last thing I'll ever want to buy. And you buy it, you pay for it, it comes and you think, fantastic.

But it never lasts very long. And usually with me it's something ridiculous. Like, I think I was on holiday in Sky and I've always wanted a mandolin and I thought, oh, mandolin, I'm going to buy a mandolin. That's the last big thing I'll ever want to buy. Of course I've got the mandolin and I never touch it and I keep thinking about all the other stuff I don't have. And it's all shaped on just now. We can so easily find that our thoughts and our priorities are dominated by what is happening or what we think has to happen right now. So the instant takes precedence over the important. And I think that we all fall into this trap. And I'm going to just give two or three examples and I'm just giving these examples to make you think. I'm not giving these examples to make you feel guilty and these are all things that I've done and got wrong myself. But I'm just going to give these examples and I hope that they just help us all to think. If I ask you, what's more important? Netflix or sponsoring a child? But which one do we spend more money on a month?

What's more important? Reading the Bible or reading the news? But which one do we do first in the morning? What's more important? Where are you going to go in your next holiday? Or where are you going to go for eternity? But which one did you think about more last week?

As I said, none of these things in the novel themselves are bad and I'm not saying any of that to guilt you. And I'm a bit of a hypocrite saying it because I've done all of these things myself. Just saying that to recognise that it's so easy to make the right now the thing that matters most. And it's a dangerous path. It's a path that causes a lot of problems.

Even at each day level, it's the path that leads to moodiness. So don't like this right now so I'm going to be in a bad mood. But worse, it's a path that can lead to addiction because the right now of getting whatever it is we long for, whether alcohol, pornography, drugs, whatever. It's the right now that makes us do that. It's the path that can lead to us falling out with a colleague or a neighbour, where the fact that they hurt us or annoyed us right now means that we're ready to sacrifice the friendship that we've built over months and years.

[16:22] It's a path that can lead us to slip back as Christians, where the right now seems worth it in terms of a sin. And all of that shows us that it's a path that can actually lead to misery.

And often we expect God to make what we want happen and if he doesn't, we get disillusioned. He's not meeting our expectations and the result is that we can then take things into our own hands. I need to pray and I'm sure that you need to pray as well. Oh God, please help me to have a better perspective of what really matters. It's so easy to make the right now all that matters.

And that's what led to much misunderstanding among the Jews of the first century. But what about now? How are these words misunderstood now? Well, I think again it's done in lots of ways and we'll see that if we go through the same three parts again. We can misunderstand that concept of sin. Sometimes that can be by playing it down and thinking it's not, but sometimes it can be by being overwhelmed by it, but more often it's by failing to recognize just how awful it is by kind of playing it down. We misunderstand sin and think it's not that big a deal, but we've got to remember that sin is massive and it's far bigger than being conquered by a foreign power like the Romans. But

it's interesting that there are actually similarities because sin is an unwanted ruler in our lives. Sin seeks to exploit us just as a foreign invader would have done in those days and sin is merciless just like the Romans and the Greeks and others were when they conquered the nations. Sin is all of these things, but on a cosmic scale sin wants to control you and me. And that makes perfect sense because when is it when we commit our worst sins? When is it we do the most stupid things in terms of anger or indulgence or sexual sin or anything like that? When is it when we make our biggest mistakes? It's when we lose control of ourselves because sin wants control of us instead. Sin wants to exploit you, sin wants to use humanity, people like you and me, and to make us less and less like God and to accomplish more and more of the destructive ends of sin, which is why people behave so badly towards one another.

And sin is merciless. The kingdom of evil wants to destroy you and every other human. It's horribly destructive and it ultimately results to death in death. So sin is a massive problem, a cosmic problem. The whole universe is affected. That's why there's disasters, disease, decay, conflict everywhere. The universe is broken. It's a cosmic problem.

[19 : 46] But it's also a personal problem because it's their sins. It's my sins. Sin is not just the universe's biggest problem, it's my biggest problem.

Sin is not just explaining the things that I wish didn't happen to me. Sin is also explaining all the things I wish I'd never done. Sin's the reason for my bruises, but it's also the reason for all of my regrets. And I can't separate those two things. In terms of sin, I'm both a victim and that I'm born into a world that's broken, but I'm a villain as well. I could never stand before you today and say I'm innocent in terms of sin. And that's why we must never underestimate how damaging sin is and we must never underestimate how much sin has damaged us. It's a massive problem.

And I'm sure maybe a Jew would think, you know, when they saw the sin, that phrase, you know, a phrase like that, they think, you know, be safe for my sins. That's nothing compared to the Romans. That's what we really need to be saved from. But none of that's the wrong way around. You look at the Roman Empire and the brutality of it in those days, as awful as that was, there's still nothing compared to the seriousness of sin.

We also misunderstand the his people bit. And so just like the sin is bigger than the Romans, his people is bigger than the Jews. We said that Matthew is dropping hints about this.

We saw that in the genealogy, but there's much more to come throughout the rest of the Gospel. In chapter two, who is it that comes to visit Jesus? It's wise men from the East, foreigners, Gentiles. Chapter eight, you see Matthew highlighting the faith of a Roman centurion.

[21 : 49] In chapter 15, he highlights the faith of a Canaanite woman. And at the very end of Matthew's Gospel, we have the Great Commission of Jesus to go into all nations and make disciples. That his people, as we're saying, is way bigger than just the Jews. It's people from all nations. But for you today, there's three things I want you to see in this phrase that are crucial.

First of all, his people are sinners. The two are connected together. And that is so crucial for every single one of us. You think about Jesus's people. They're sinners. Now that's crucial for anyone who thinks, you know, that sin isn't an issue and thinks, you know, I'm a really fantastic person. That's the kind of person that Jesus would come for. That's to completely misunderstand things. But I don't think any of you will be thinking like that. What I think you're far more likely to be thinking is that you're too awful and that you're too much of a problem. But that's a misunderstanding as well. Jesus's people are sinners. That's exactly who he came for.

And that's not the elite, not the sorted, not the knowledgeable, not the confident, not the flash, just sinner.

And if anyone is sitting here today thinking that you're not able to match up or whatever, that there's something wrong with you in terms of becoming a follower of Jesus, that is simply not through his people are broken people. They're sinners that he's come to save. But the second thing I want you to notice is that his people are his. You might think, well, yes, that's obvious to us, but I think it's so worthwhile thinking about his people are his. So if you're a Christian or if you become one, you are his. That means you are so precious to him. You're worth so much to him.

You belong to him. And these verses are one of the many places in the scripture where we see that God's saving plan is executed at his initiative. In other words, he takes the first step. And that divine initiative proves, yes, how gracious God is, but it also proves how precious you are.

[24 : 45] And I want you to ask yourself, you know, just how would you define yourself? So asking, first of all, you ask a Christian, how would you define yourself? You may be saying, well, I'm saved,

I'm redeemed, I'm forgiven, all that's true. But you're probably more likely to say, well, I'm struggling. I'm not what I should be. I'm failing. This verse is telling you that over all those kind of sentiments is this one glorious truth. You're his. And if anyone's maybe not sure where you stand before God, not sure if you're a Christian or not, or thinking about it, or trying you know, to work it out, this is what Jesus wants you to be.

He just wants you to be his. He wants you to belong to him. And that reality that we're his people, for me, is the greatest motivation to obey. When I get up to God in mourning, I want to serve Jesus and I want to obey him. And the fact that I belong to him motivates me to do that. Because I'm not my own. I'm his. And I want to live for him. So his people are sinners. His people are his. His people are people. Again, you probably think to us, this is not exactly profound, but I hope you can see that it is because it's actually so beautiful. There's this togetherness in it all. People, you're thinking something plural. You're thinking of a crowd, of a family. In other words, Jesus didn't come for me. He came for us, always as I group together a people. That's what he wants to establish. We're his people.

And we can also misunderstand that we'll save part of it. That word save is a really interesting word because it can actually, there's kind of two meanings, I think, to the Greek word save, which I think are important for us to recognize. The one you're probably familiar with, the idea of being rescued. So when Peter climbed out of the boat to meet Jesus, later on in Matthew's Gospel, he cried out to him because when he saw the wind, he was afraid and beginning to think, he cried out, Lord, save me. And we can all imagine that, the idea that he was aware that he needed to be rescued. And in terms of our salvation, that's exactly two. Jesus rescues us. He breaks sins, grip over us. He overthrows sins rule, disarms sins, pile it, crushes sins, attacked. And as a result, we're delivered, forgiven, liberated and safe forever. But that word save doesn't just mean rescue. It can also mean to heal and to restore. So there's a great example of this in Matthew 9 with the woman who'd suffered from a discharge of blood for 12 years. She came up and touched the fringe of his garment, but she said to herself, if I only touch his garment, I will be made well.

Now that phrase made well is translated the same word, the word save. And it's reminding us that Jesus isn't just rescuing us. He's healing us. He's healing our wounds, breaking our habits, transforming us. And it's an amazing reminder that Jesus isn't just come to rescue, you know, really strong, capable people who've happened to fall into trouble in the sea and he's just rescuing them. He's come to heal people who are bruised and battered and hurting.

And it's reminding us that Jesus' salvation is not just about getting a ticket to heaven and avoiding hell. Yes, that's part of it, but it's bigger and better than that. It's about creating a new humanity and a restored creation. And that begins now. That's why sanctification starts now.

[28 : 53] And all of that is why Jesus' mission is not about getting back to the past glory days of the Old Testament. It's about transforming today and transforming a future. And so we've been reminded in all of this that, yeah, we mustn't have a small view of sin, but at the same time, we've got to make sure we don't have a small view of saving. And so, yes, Jesus will transform things for the future, but he's also transforming things for us this week. He's transforming us as people so that we can live as those who are becoming more and more like Him. And we must never separate the two, thinking, oh yeah, I'll get my ticket to heaven and I'll do what I like during my life because I'll be fine then. That's not what Christian salvation is about at all. It's about transforming everything, security for heaven and renewal now so that we can live for Him. In other words, Jesus is not just rescuing you to make you safe. He's also renovating you to make you useful. And that's why

Jesus doesn't just save us from a terrifying death. He also saves us from a boring life. That's why following Jesus isn't just a case of saying, oh well, I'm going to make the rest of my life miserable, but thankfully when I die I'll be safe. That is not the Christian gospel at all.

Being a Christian makes tomorrow amazing and it makes eternity amazing because we've got someone to live for, someone who's with us, a purpose and a goal so that we can serve Him as part of a community.

Jesus wants to give us eternal life and that begins now. And I can give you two guarantees. I can guarantee that if you follow Jesus you will be safe for all eternity and enjoy heaven that's beyond anything I can describe. But I can also guarantee that if you start following Jesus today, then it'll make this week better. And every single week of your life. And not bet in the sense of easy or rich or anything like that, that's a lot of nonsense. But in the sense of filling the hole in your life that nothing else will fill. And that's what I can tell you as a follower of Jesus, that he has filled a hole

in my life that nothing else can fill.

[31 : 23] And it's just brilliant. He delivered us from an awful death. He also delivers us from a boring life. And the last thing I want to highlight is the word will. This is maybe the most easy word to misunderstood because sometimes you can sit here thinking, I want Jesus to save me but he probably won't. Or he might not. If you think like that, I want you to take that word and stamp it onto your heart. He will save you. He absolutely will. Now you don't need a thunderbolt to appear in the sky.

You don't need a fuzzy feeling to appear in your bowels or whatever. You don't need any of that. You just need to listen to his promise and say, Jesus, yes, please save me. And he will. Because it's impossible for God to lie and it's impossible for God to break a promise. And your feelings and whether or not there's writing across the sky when you walk home is irrelevant because that's all you need. That word will. He will save you. He's not going to back out. He's not going to mess it up. He's not going to change his mind for all who trust in him. He will save. So we've got these three statements. So simple yet it's so easy to misunderstand.

[33 : 09] We have to make sure that we recognize what it says. It's about there since his people will save. Which one do you find hardest to believe? Do you think Jesus? No, there's no way he can save me from my sins. I'm too messed up. Do you think there's no way I can be part of his people? I'm not cut out for it. Do you think he won't want to save me? If you think any of those things you are misunderstanding Jesus. And what I want you to recognize is that when the promise is made that he will save his people from their sins. One of the people that the angel was thinking about was you. And God's brought you here today to hear that. Amen. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you so much for these words that Jesus will save his people from their sins. Whether we have been those who followed you for many years or for a short time, whether we're Christians or whether we're seeking you or not you, please write these words on your heart. Amen.