

December 21, 2025

Matthew 1:18-25:

Nothing to Figure Out

- I. The Audacity of Human "Wisdom"
- II. What God Figured Out Before the World Began
- III. God's Word Still Does What It Says

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“Nothing to Figure Out”

Matthew 1:18-25

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,

Anyone who has ever followed a cooking recipe from a trusted source, or really any instructions, whether it's building something or putting something together, knows well that eventually you reach a step that feels completely wrong. Some traditional risotto recipes instruct you to stop stirring entirely for long stretches, even though every instinct says constant stirring prevents burning. Certain breads, especially no-knead or sourdough, tell you to walk away for hours or even a whole day when the dough looks flat, lifeless, and unfinished. Every instinct says, “I need to fix this.” And yet, touching it might ruin it.

At that moment, especially for those experienced in their craft, the temptation is to adjust the instructions and to “improve” them, so they make sense to you. But those who have learned the hard way will tell you that if you insist on understanding every step before you follow it, you will destroy what you are trying to make. Only after the work is finished do you see why that strange instruction mattered.

I. The Audacity of Human “Wisdom”

As we enter this final Sunday in Advent, we reflect on the account of Christ's birth as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew. It seems that just as businesses have a hard time waiting until closer to Christmas to roll out their holiday deals, and just as many of us decorate our homes long before Thanksgiving has even begun, so it is with those who crafted our lectionary. Who can blame them? We do not call it “the most wonderful time of the year” for nothing. And in its proper context, where it is stripped away from the noise, the sales, and the distractions of commercialization, the celebration of the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ truly is most wonderful.

It brings us to our knees in reverence and awe as we consider the faith of Mary and Joseph, the quiet yet unstoppable power of God at work behind the scenes, orchestrating all things according to His gracious and saving will. Above all, it draws our eyes to that little babe born in Bethlehem—God in the flesh, wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in a manger. And yet, when we really stop to consider it, this is a strange step in God's plan of salvation.

Not strange in the sense of being foolish or misguided, but strange when viewed from the outside looking in. It does not fit human reason, and it does not follow the paths we would choose or the solutions we would devise. A holy God enters a broken world not in power, not in visible glory, not with armies or displays of might, but as a helpless child. Everything in us wants to ask “why?” Everything in us wants an explanation, justification, or something that makes this make sense on our terms.

What makes this even more striking and more troubling is how easily the sin that festers in our hearts and minds convinces us that we somehow know better. Better than the One who created the Heavens and the earth. Better than the One who has always been and always will be. Better than the One who fashioned us, sustains us, and who created us for eternal life with Him in perfect joy, peace, and harmony. Sin whispers to us that God's ways must answer to our understanding, that His plans must align with our instincts, that His will should make sense to us before we follow it. Yes, somehow, incredibly, we are tempted to have the audacity to believe that we know better.

It is all the same old lie of the devil in the Garden of Eden. "Did God really say?" And here is what God has to say about the audacity of humanity to believe such a lie,

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth...so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it." (Isaiah 55:8-11)

That, dear brothers and sisters, is where the Word of God leaves us. Not standing over the recipe with our hands on our hips, convinced we can improve it. Not stirring when God has told us to stop. Not trying to fix what He is doing because it looks unfinished or lifeless to our eyes. But exposed for what we really are. We are people who cannot bear to leave God's instructions alone. Sin does not simply break God's commandments; it questions His wisdom and insists on explanations. It demands that God's will make sense to us before we will trust it. Like the impatient cook who ruins the dish by refusing to wait, we so often interfere with what God is doing.

This does not happen because we are merely careless or impatient, but because, by nature, we do not trust Him. Our sinful will is not neutral, but it is bound. It cannot bear to let God's Word be His Word. Left to ourselves, we always reach in to fix, to correct, to improve what God has spoken, because sin does not believe God is good or wise unless He proves it on our terms. The truth is uncomfortable, but it is clear: when God speaks, there is nothing to figure out. There is only His Word and our complete inability, apart from His grace, to trust it.

II. What God Figured Out Before the World Began

Here is the unaltered truth that leaves no room for us to change: long before Joseph ever wrestled with confusion, long before Mary ever carried the child in her womb, long before sin had finished destroying God's good creation, God had already figured it out, and this is made evident by His promises. When Adam and Eve fell into sin, God did not pause to rethink His plan. He spoke and He promised that the offspring of the woman would crush the serpent's head,

even as His own heel would be bruised. Century after century, God repeated and clarified that promise: a child born to a virgin, a Son called Immanuel—God with us.

And now, in Matthew's Gospel, the angel does not offer an explanation or invite analysis. He declares fulfillment: "She *will* bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he *will* save his people from their sins." This is not a puzzle to solve or a plan to evaluate. It is the Gospel. What our bound will could never accomplish, God has already done. In this child, born of Mary, God Himself keeps the Law for us, bears its judgment for us, and delivers salvation to us by His Word alone. There is nothing to figure out. There is only Christ, given and promised, exactly as God said He would be.

The Word of God does not return empty. What God promised, He fulfilled exactly as He had spoken. When the angel speaks to Joseph, that same Word reaches its appointed moment. The promise becomes flesh, the Savior is named, sin is answered, and salvation is accomplished. Nothing about this hinges on Joseph's insight, Mary's explanation, or humanity's approval. God speaks, and what He speaks comes to pass. The strange way that confounds human wisdom is the very way God chose from the beginning, and it succeeds because it is His Word. There is nothing left unresolved, nothing left uncertain, and nothing left undone. What God set out to do, He has done just as He said He would.

III. God's Word Still Does What It Says

As different as it sounds to the ears of the flesh, thank and praise God that He is the one who did it all. For if we had done it, sin, death, and the devil would be the victor. But for the sake of His righteous plan of sending His one and only Son, Jesus, we have, by faith in Him, been freed from the bondage to sin and have now been bound to Him in a death and resurrection like His.

As Romans 8 teaches,

"For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

Being among the privileged men, women, and children who get to read, hear, and celebrate all that Christ has revealed in His Word, we quickly realize that God's Word still does what it says. The promise of salvation did not remain a plan hidden in Heaven, but it took on flesh and blood in the womb of Mary. The Word was spoken, and the Word became flesh. The Savior was named, and in that naming, salvation was already being carried into the world. In the same way, God's Word continues to accomplish what He intended for it to do.

When He speaks forgiveness, forgiveness is given. When He declares sins forgiven for Christ's sake, they are truly forgiven. When He says your Baptism washes you clean, it does.

When He says His body and blood are present in, with, and under the bread and wine for the forgiveness of our sins, it truly is. His Word does not depend on our understanding or our feelings. What God speaks comes to pass, just as surely now as it did when the angel spoke to Joseph.

The greatest comfort for sinners like us is that God places His saving Word where it can be received. Not only that, but it is God who does all the work to give us this Word from start to finish. God, who once placed His Son into the arms of Mary, now places that same saving Christ before His Church by His Word. He does not ask you to figure out whether His promise applies to you. He does not wait for you to be confident enough or wise enough to accept it. He gives it freely. And where God gives Christ, there salvation is present and complete. Sin is not left unanswered. Guilt is not left unresolved. Death does not get the final word. God's Word has already spoken, and it still speaks. There is nothing left to solve, nothing left to complete, nothing left to figure out. There is only Christ, given by God's Word, and where Christ is given, salvation is certain.

Amen.

Pastor Lucas Abbott