

GOD WITH US

Introduction

And I think one of the great questions of the Christian life is this:

How do we remain anchored in joy when life hurts?

How do we remain anchored in joy when prayers seem unanswered?

How do we remain anchored in joy when circumstances don't make sense?

How do we remain anchored in joy when suffering enters our story?

Because if we are honest, most of us find it relatively easy to trust God when life is going well.

The real test comes when life hurts.

When grief comes.

When disappointment comes.

When loss comes.

When suffering comes.

When we find ourselves asking:

"God, where are You?"

And perhaps the most remarkable thing about Scripture is that God never promises us a life free from suffering.

Instead, He promises us something far greater.

His presence.

Isaiah 43:1-3 (ESV)

1 But now thus says the LORD,

he who created you, O Jacob,

he who formed you, O Israel:

"Fear not, for I have redeemed you;

*I have called you by name, **you are mine.***

*2 **When** you pass through the waters, **I will be with you;***

*and through the rivers, they **shall not overwhelm you;***

when** you walk through fire you **shall not be burned,

*and the flame **shall not consume you.***

*3 For I am the LORD **your God,**
the Holy One of Israel, **your Saviour...***

Daniel 3: Shadrach Meshach Abednego...

They still had to face the fear. God was with them. 4 men in fire.

Notice what God does not say.

He does not say:

"If you pass through the waters."

He says: "When you pass through the waters."

He does not say: "If you walk through the fire."

He says: "When you walk through the fire."

The promise of Scripture is not that suffering will never come.

The promise is that we will never face it alone.

"I will be with you."

That promise runs throughout the entire Bible.

It is the promise given to Moses.

The promise given to Joshua.

The promise given to Israel.

The promise fulfilled in Jesus.

Emmanuel.

God with us.

"And tonight I want us to look at the life of a woman who received the same promise many of us cling to today: 'The Lord is with you.'"

Her life wasn't easy.

Her circumstances weren't comfortable.

She didn't understand everything God was doing.

But God was with her.

Her name was Mary.

The account of her life shows us something profound:
God's presence and deep pain can coexist.

And if we understand that, I believe we will discover how to remain anchored in joy when life hurts.

Luke 1:26-35 (ESV)

*26 In the sixth month the angel **Gabriel was sent** from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, 27 to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, "**Greetings, O favoured one, the Lord is with you!**" 29 But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. 30 And the angel said to her, "**Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God.** 31 And behold, **you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.** 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." 34 And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" 35 And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.*

Matthew 1:18-23 (ESV)

*18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19 And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. 20 But as he considered these things, behold, **an angel of the Lord appeared to him** in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for **that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.** 21 **She will bear a son, and you shall call his name***

Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” 22 All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 23 “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us).

Notice the tension in these two passages:

- Luke gives us the promise.
- Matthew immediately gives us the problem.
- Luke gives us favour.
- Matthew gives us misunderstanding.
- Luke gives us: "The Lord is with you."
- Matthew gives us Joseph considering divorce.
- Luke gives us a divine calling.
- Matthew gives us a potential scandal.
- Luke gives us heaven's perspective.
- Matthew gives us earth's response.

And before Mary ever gave birth to Jesus, she was already learning a lesson that many of us spend our lives learning:

The Lord being with you does not mean life will be without pain, without difficulty, without misunderstanding.

1. God With Us in Misunderstanding

The first challenge Mary faced.

Misunderstanding.

Gabriel says:

"Greetings, O favoured one, the Lord is with you."

What an extraordinary promise.

What an extraordinary greeting.

Imagine hearing those words spoken over your life.

Favoured.

Chosen.

Blessed.

The Lord is with you.

What would you expect to happen next?

Most of us would probably imagine life becoming easier.

Doors opening.

Things falling into place.

People supporting us.

Circumstances aligning.

Yet almost immediately Mary's life becomes complicated.

Before heaven explained her miracle, earth misunderstood it.

Before Joseph received his dream, Mary had to live with the reality of being pregnant outside of marriage.

Can you imagine the rumours?

Can you imagine the whispers?

Can you imagine the assumptions?

Can you imagine the conversations that took place after she left the room?

Can you imagine the looks?

Can you imagine the judgement?

Can you imagine trying to explain:

"No, really, an angel appeared to me."

Who would believe that?

Before Mary became the mother of the Messiah, she became the subject of speculation.

Before she carried Jesus publicly, she carried misunderstanding publicly.

And yet the Lord was with her.

I think sometimes we assume that if God is with us, people will understand us.

Mary's story says otherwise.

Sometimes **obedience to God** can lead to **misunderstanding**.

Sometimes **carrying God's purposes** can cost us our **reputation**.

Sometimes God asks us to carry something that others cannot yet understand.

And yet He is still with us.

Perhaps some of you know what that feels like.

You have obeyed God.

You have tried to do the right thing.

You have followed His leading.

And instead of applause, you faced **criticism**.

Instead of understanding, you faced **misunderstanding**.

Instead of support, you felt **isolated**.

Perhaps there are women here tonight carrying things that nobody else understands:

- A burden.
- A calling.
- A difficult decision.
- A prayer.
- A season.
- A journey.

And perhaps one of the hardest parts is that people have misunderstood you.

They have misunderstood your motives.

Misunderstood your decisions.

Misunderstood your heart.

Mary would probably understand that feeling.

And yet the angel's words remained true.

The rumours did not change them.

The whispers did not change them.
The judgement did not change them.
The Lord was with her.

And this is where I think the joy connection begins.
Because Mary's joy could not be anchored in people's opinions.
If it was, she would have lost it almost immediately.
Her joy had to be anchored somewhere deeper.
Her joy had to be anchored in God's presence.
In what God had said.
In who God was.
Not in how people responded.
And the same is true for us.

If our joy is anchored in approval, we will lose it.
If our joy is anchored in being understood, we will lose it.
If our joy is anchored in people agreeing with us, we will lose it.
But if our joy is anchored in Emmanuel—
God with us—
then even when we are misunderstood, we can remain secure.

Not because misunderstanding doesn't hurt.
It does.
But because God's presence is greater than people's opinions.
God is with us.

God was with Mary.
Not after the misunderstanding.
Not once everything was resolved.
Not once Joseph received the dream.

Right there.
In the middle of it.
The Lord was with her.

He is with us too.

In the midst of misunderstanding

2. God With Us in Uncertainty

If Point 1 teaches us that God can be with us in misunderstanding,

Point 2 teaches us that God can be with us in uncertainty.

Because one of the most difficult things in life is not necessarily suffering.

Sometimes it is not knowing.

Not knowing what God is doing. Not knowing why things are the way they are.

Not understanding why that prayer wasn't answered...

Why that person wasn't healed

Not knowing what God is doing.

Not knowing how the story is going to unfold.

Not knowing how long the season will last.

Not knowing what is around the next corner.

Not understanding why something happened or didn't happen.

And if we are honest, most of us would like more information from God.

A little more explanation.

A little more clarity.

A little more warning.

A little more certainty.

But Mary's story reminds us that even those favoured by God do not always understand what He is doing.

Yet He remains faithful.

Yet He remains present.

Yet He remains near.

The Lord was still with her.

a. No Room

Luke 2:7 (NKJV)

*7 And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there **was no room for them** in the inn.*

For centuries prophets had spoken about the coming Messiah.

Generations had waited.

Heaven had prepared.

God had orchestrated history toward this moment.

The moment had finally arrived.

The Son of God was about to enter the world.

And yet when Mary and Joseph arrive in Bethlehem, Luke tells us:

"There was no room for them in the inn."

Think about that.

The greatest event in human history.

The birth of the Son of God.

The fulfilment of centuries of prophecy.

And there was no room.

No comfortable place.

No honoured welcome.

No royal reception.

Just a stable. A manger. Animals.

The smell of livestock.

The discomfort.

The inconvenience.

The uncertainty.

Can you imagine what Mary must have thought?

Surely this is not how she imagined the story unfolding.
Surely if God had planned this for generations, there would be a room.
Surely if God had sent an angel, there would be a better place.
Surely if she was carrying the Messiah, things would be easier than this.

Yet God's purposes were unfolding perfectly.
Even when circumstances suggested otherwise.

And perhaps some of us need to hear that tonight.
Because sometimes God's purposes are birthed in inconvenient places.
Sometimes God's greatest work happens in circumstances we would never have chosen.
Sometimes the place we would never have selected becomes the place where God does His deepest work.

The absence of comfort is not the absence of God.
The absence of convenience is not the absence of God.
And the absence of understanding is not the absence of God.
The Lord was with her.

b. Flight to Egypt

Matthew 2:13 (NKJV)

13 Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him."

You would think that after everything Mary had already been through, life might finally settle down.

The child has been born.
The shepherds have come.
The promises have been fulfilled.
Surely now comes the peaceful chapter.

But instead an angel appears to Joseph and says:

"Take the child and flee."

Not settle. Flee.

Not rest. Run.

Not safety. Escape.

Mary finds herself becoming something she probably never imagined she would be.

A refugee mother.

Forced to leave home.

Forced to leave familiarity.

Forced into uncertainty.

Forced into a foreign land.

Because someone wants her Son dead.

Can you imagine the questions?

Can you imagine the fear?

Can you imagine the sleepless nights?

Can you imagine trying to make sense of what God was doing?

Why would God allow this?

Why would the Messiah begin His life this way?

Why would the Son of God have to flee?

We are not told that Mary understood.

We are not told that she had answers.

We are not told that she saw the bigger picture.

But we do know this:

The Lord was with her.

And sometimes God's protection does not look like removing the danger.

Sometimes it looks like sustaining us in the middle of it.

Sometimes divine protection looks less like exemption and more like preservation.

The Lord was with her.

Sometimes God is our Deliverer and sometimes He is our Keeper.

c. Losing Jesus

Luke 2:41-50 (NKJV)

*41 His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. 42 And when He was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem according to the custom of the feast. 43 When they had finished the days, as they returned, the Boy Jesus lingered behind in Jerusalem. And Joseph and His mother did not know it; 44 but supposing Him to have been in the company, they went a day's journey, and sought Him among their relatives and acquaintances. 45 So when they did not find Him, they returned to Jerusalem, seeking Him. 46 Now so it was that after three days they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions. 47 And all who heard Him were astonished at His understanding and answers. 48 So when they saw Him, they were amazed; and His mother said to Him, "Son, why have You done this to us? Look, Your father and I have sought You **anxiously**."*

*49 And He said to them, "Why did you seek Me? Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?" 50 **But they did not understand the statement which He spoke to them.***

Jesus is twelve years old. Mary and Joseph leave Jerusalem after the feast.

They assume Jesus is somewhere in the travelling group.

And then they discover He is missing.

Can you imagine the panic?

The fear?

The distress?

For three days they search.

And when they finally find Him, Luke tells us:

"They did not understand the statement which He spoke to them."

I love that verse.

Because it reminds us that there are seasons when we simply do not understand what God is doing.

There are delays we do not understand.

Losses we do not understand.

Situations we cannot explain.

And perhaps this is where many of us struggle most.

Not with God's power.

Not even with God's goodness.

But with His silence.

His timing.

His methods.

Because we want certainty.

We want a map.

We want the next ten steps.

And often God gives us enough light for only the next one.

We need to remember that:

The absence of understanding is not the absence of God.

If our joy is anchored in having answers, we will lose it.

If our joy is anchored in certainty, we will lose it.

If our joy is anchored in understanding everything God is doing, we will lose it.

But if our joy is anchored in Emmanuel—

God with us—

then even when we do not understand, we can still trust.

Even when we cannot trace His hand, we can trust His heart.

Because the Lord promised to be with us always.

And that is enough.

3. God With Us in Deep Sorrow

If Point 1 teaches us that God is with us in misunderstanding,
And Point 2 teaches us that God is with us in uncertainty,
Then Point 3 teaches us perhaps the hardest lesson of all.
God is with us in deep sorrow.

There may come times in our walk with the Lord where we find ourselves in a place of genuine pain.

A place we never wanted to go.

A place we never imagined we would find ourselves.

A place where our hearts are completely broken.

A place of unanswered prayers. Of loss. Of grief. Of a pain that no words can describe.

A place where our souls ache.

Even there... God is with us.

a. A Sword Will Pierce Your Soul Also

Luke 2:34-35 (NKJV)

34 Then Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary His mother, "Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against 35 (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed."

Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to the temple.

Simeon takes the child in his arms.

He blesses God.

He speaks of salvation.

He speaks of redemption.

He speaks of the Messiah.

And then he turns to Mary.

And he says something remarkable.

Something that must have sounded strange at the time.
Something that Mary probably could not yet fully comprehend.
"And a sword will pierce through your own soul also."

What a prophecy.
What a statement.

Even while holding the promise, suffering is foretold.
Even while holding the Messiah, sorrow is predicted.
Even while experiencing God's favour, pain is promised.

Notice what Simeon does not say.
He does not say: "Mary, because God is with you, suffering will never touch you."
He does not say: "Mary, because you are highly favoured, your life will be easy."
He does not say: "Mary, because you carry the Messiah, your heart will never be broken."

Instead he says:
"A sword will pierce your own soul also."
The Lord was with her.
And the sword was coming.
Both were true. At the same time.

And I think that is one of the hardest lessons in the Christian life.
We often assume that God's presence and suffering cannot coexist.
Yet throughout Scripture they repeatedly do.

The Lord was with Joseph. And he was betrayed.
The Lord was with David. And he was hunted.
The Lord was with Paul. And he was imprisoned.
The Lord was with Mary. And a sword pierced her soul.

The Lord being with us does not mean we escape every sorrow.
It means we never face sorrow alone.

b. Watching Jesus Rejected

As Jesus grows older, Mary's sorrow begins to unfold.

Gradually.

Year after year.

She watches people misunderstand Him.

Reject Him.

Criticise Him.

Mock Him.

Question Him.

Oppose Him.

Can you imagine what that must have been like?

She knew who He was.

She remembered the angel.

She remembered Bethlehem.

She remembered the shepherds.

She remembered Simeon.

She remembered everything God had spoken.

And now she watches people reject the One she knows to be the Messiah.

Every mother wants her child to be loved.

Every mother wants her child to flourish.

Every mother wants her child to be accepted.

Yet Mary watches her Son become increasingly opposed.

Increasingly rejected.

Increasingly hated.

And the sword begins to cut deeper.

The Lord was with her.

c. Standing at the Foot of the Cross

John 19:25-27 (NKJV)

25 Now there stood by the cross of Jesus His mother, and His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. 26 When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing by, He said to His mother, "Woman, behold your son!" 27 Then He said to the disciple, "Behold your mother!" And from that hour that disciple took her to his own home.

Mary's journey eventually reaches Calvary.

The woman who was told, "The Lord is with you"

Stands beneath a cross.

Watching her Son suffer.

Watching her Son bleed.

Watching her Son die.

The child she carried.

The child she nurtured.

The child she taught to walk.

The child she watched grow.

Now hangs before her.

Can you imagine that moment?

Can you imagine the helplessness?

Can you imagine the grief?

Can you imagine the anguish?

And suddenly Simeon's prophecy comes flooding back.

"A sword will pierce your own soul also."

The sword has arrived.

Not metaphorically. Not theoretically. Not prophetically.

Actually. Personally. Painfully.

The angel's promise has not changed.

The Lord is still with her.

The circumstances have changed.

The pain has deepened.
The sorrow has intensified.
But the promise remains.
The Lord was with her.

Mary heard two prophecies early in her journey.
The first was: "The Lord is with you."
The second was: "A sword will pierce your own soul also."

And perhaps one of the most profound truths in all of Scripture is this:
Both were true.
The Lord was with her. And the sword came.
The Lord was with her. And her heart broke.
The Lord was with her. And she stood at the foot of the cross.
The Lord was with her. And she wept.
Both were true.

Application

And perhaps that is where many of us struggle.
Because we assume that if God is with us, the waters should not come.
The fire should not come.
The grief should not come.
The heartbreak should not come.

And yet God's promise was never that we would avoid the waters.
His promise was that He would be with us in them.

In the middle of one of the darkest, most terrifying and demeaning moments of my life, I experienced something I cannot fully explain.
A profound awareness of God's presence on my hands and face.
A supernatural clarity of thought.
A calmness and peace that should not have been there.
I cannot fully explain it.

I simply knew: He was with me.

Not after it happened. Not once I was safe.

Not once everything was over.

Right there. In the middle of it.

He was with me. I didn't know what the outcome was going to be, but I knew whatever happened, God was with me.

Isaiah 43:1-3 (ESV)

1 But now thus says the LORD,

he who created you, O Jacob,

he who formed you, O Israel:

“Fear not, for I have redeemed you;

*I have called you by name, **you are mine.***

*2 **When** you pass through the waters, **I will be with you;***

*and through the rivers, they **shall not overwhelm you;***

when** you walk through fire you **shall not be burned,

*and the flame **shall not consume you.***

*3 For I am the LORD **your God,***

*the Holy One of Israel, **your Saviour...***

Isaiah 43 is my promise.

The Lord was with me in the waters.

The Lord was with me in the fire.

I have not been consumed.

Romans 8:35-39 (NLT)

35 Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? 36 (As the Scriptures say, "For your sake we are killed every day; we are being slaughtered like sheep.") 37 No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us. 38 And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about

tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God’s love. 39 No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul asks a remarkable question.

What can separate us from the love of Christ?

Trouble? No.

Hardship? No.

Persecution? No.

Danger? No.

Sword? No.

Trauma? No.

Loss? No.

Suffering? No.

Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

Not because suffering is small.

Not because pain is insignificant.

Not because grief is not real.

But because God’s love is greater.

Paul reaches the conclusion that every believer eventually has to discover for themselves:

Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 15:13 (NLT)

*13 I pray that God, the source of hope, **will fill you completely with joy and peace** because you trust in him. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit.*

Romans 15:13 (AMP)

13 May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing [through the experience of your faith] that by the power of the Holy Spirit you will abound in hope and overflow with confidence in His promises.

Notice **where Paul says joy comes from.**

Not from understanding.

Not from circumstances.

Not from outcomes.

Not from relief.

But from **believing.**

Trusting.

Resting.

Anchoring ourselves in God.

And that brings us back to where we began.

Mary's story illustrates:

The Lord was with her.

In misunderstanding.

In uncertainty.

In sorrow.

My story is teaching me:

The Lord is with me.

The Lord is with you.

In misunderstanding.

In uncertainty.

In sorrow.

In the waters.

In the fire.

In the waiting.

In the grief.

In the questions.

In the struggle.

The Lord is with us.

And because He is with us, there is hope.

There is peace.

And we can be anchored in joy.

Pray