



Sunday School Lesson for December 19, 2004.
Released on December 15, 2004.

Have a blessed Christmas!

Study: Matthew 1:17-25. "A Call to Respond"
Questions and answers
are found below.

Devotional Reading: Luke 1:26-32.
Background Scripture: Matthew 1.
TIME: 6 or 5 B.C.
PLACE: Nazareth; Bethlehem

Golden Text: Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife.-Matthew 1:24.

Matthew 1:17-25

17 So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David until the carrying away into Babylon are fourteen generations; and from the carrying away into Babylon unto Christ are fourteen generations.

18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost.

19 Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privily.

20 But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.

21 And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus: for he shall save his people from their sins.

22 Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying,

23 Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.

24 Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife:

25 And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name Jesus.

HOW TO SAY IT

Abraham. Ay-bruh-ham.
Jehoshua. Je-hosh-you-uh.
Joshua. Josh-yew-uh.
Messiah. Meh-sigh-uh.

TODAY'S AIM

After participating in this lesson, each student will be able to:

1. Recount the events that led to Joseph's gracious response to Mary's pregnancy.
2. Explain how Joseph's obedience to God's command revealed his character.
3. Make a commitment to respond with obedience to God's leading in a specific life situation.

INTRODUCTION

It had been four hundred years since Malachi, the last prophet of the Old Testament, had ministered. During that time no further word was given to Israel about her expected Messiah. Now Rome, the dominant power in the Mediterranean world, ruled Palestine. There was much cruelty associated with Roman rule. Perhaps because of that, the anticipation and hope for the Messiah was unusually high. Of course, the people of Israel were looking for a political Messiah who would free them from Rome's tyranny. That is why they failed to recognize Him when He finally arrived.

Matthew, however, presents Jesus as the King of Israel, the long-anticipated Messiah. Because of his emphasis, Matthew quoted many Old Testament passages and showed how Jesus fulfilled them. That is part of the reason he gave more details for Joseph's involvement in Jesus' birth than the other Gospel authors did.

The Genealogy of Christ (Matthew 1:17)

1. What do we know about the life of Joseph?

Joseph, the man in our text this week, is the "father" of Jesus. We know at least six important things about Joseph. First, Matthew 1:19 calls him "a just man." In the ancient context, this means he was an upstanding, respected citizen who feared God and kept God's commandments. We see this in his obedience to the expressed will of God twice in Matthew (1:24; 2:21).

Second, Matthew 13:55 tells us that Joseph was a carpenter, a skilled tradesman in his community. Third, Matthew indicates that Joseph became the father of a large family. Four brothers are

listed for Jesus, and Matthew 13:55,56 indicates at least three sisters. Fourth, we know from both Matthew 1:20 and Luke 1:27 that Joseph was a descendant of King David, and thus from the tribe of Judah.

Fifth, Joseph was a resident of Nazareth, a small town in Galilee approximately sixty-five miles north of Jerusalem (see Luke 2:4,39). Sixth, we learn that Joseph was a dreamer. He was not a dreamer in a negative sense-one who lives in a dreamland and refuses to face the realities of life. Rather, he was one who received messages from God in his dreams.

2. How did Matthew summarize the generations leading to the Messiah, and how did he organize it (Matthew 1:17)?

Both Matthew and Luke recorded a genealogy of Jesus. Matthew followed the line leading to Joseph, while Luke followed the line leading to Mary. When Matthew arrived at Joseph in his genealogy, he very carefully stated that he was the "husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus" (v. 16). This is a clear statement about the virgin birth of Jesus, because it indicates Joseph was not the human father of Jesus. The Greek word translated "whom" is a feminine relative pronoun, indicating Mary was the only human parent.

Matthew then summarized the generations from Abraham to Jesus in three sets of fourteen: from Abraham to David, from David to the Babylonian Captivity, and from the Captivity to Christ. There were in actuality more generations over this time period than forty-two. It was quite common for ancient genealogies to compress history by leaving out individuals who were less significant than others. It was also common for genealogies to be centered around important historical events related to the families.

Matthew apparently built his genealogy in this way. Abraham was the father of the Jewish nation; David is the one to whom God gave the special covenant promise of a kingdom forever. The Captivity appeared to put a stop to the flow of the family, and, of course, Christ was the ultimate object in the entire genealogy. The emphasis in Matthew's summary is on eras more than individuals, which the Jewish mind would have understood more naturally than we can. It was probably recorded this way to help the readers remember it as well.

3. Which two covenants covered the period summarized by the genealogy of Matthew?

Two covenants surround the first era from Abraham to David. The Abrahamic covenant was a promise to Abraham of multiplied descendants, possession of the land of Canaan, and blessing upon all the families of the earth (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:18-21; 17:2-21). The Davidic covenant was a promise of an eternal house, kingdom, and throne (2 Sam. 7:4-16). At the time of the Babylonian Captivity, it appeared that neither of these covenants was going to be fulfilled. Israel was no longer in the Promised

Land but was scattered elsewhere.

When the Jewish people began to return after Jeremiah's prophesied seventy years of captivity (Jeremiah 25:12; 29:10), it was obvious that God was indeed going to proceed with His promises. Eventually the nation was again established, and even though the people suffered much from the various empires that ruled them, the nation remained in existence until many years after Christ's earthly life.

Problem to Solution

(Matthew 1:18-21)

Sticky Situation (vs. 18, 19)

4. What were the stages of a Jewish marriage in New Testament days (v. 18)?

It is important that we understand Jewish marriages if we are to comprehend what happened with Joseph and Mary. There were three stages to Jewish marriages. The first was an agreement between the parents of a boy and a girl that they would in the future become husband and wife. Sometimes this agreement was reached while the young people were still several years from marrying age. The young people themselves sometimes had no voice in the matter but had to accept the decision of their parents.

The second stage began with a formal, public ratification of the agreement. This took place in front of witnesses but did not result in the young people living together. Instead, for perhaps as long as a year, they were considered betrothed to one another and no longer available for anyone else. Once this ratification had taken place, Joseph and Mary were set apart for each other, waiting for the time of the actual wedding ceremony. This betrothal, or espousal, was not capable of being broken except through death or divorce.

The marriage would finally be consummated when the bridegroom went to the bride's house and, in a celebratory procession, took her back to his home. This is illustrated in the parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25:1-13. Even though this was the true beginning of married life for the couple, during the betrothal they were viewed as already married. Deuteronomy 22:23,24 gives instruction concerning a betrothed woman who was immoral. She is referred to as a "wife" in verse 24, showing the permanence of the relationship.

5. What important information did Matthew give regarding when Mary was found to be with child?

During the betrothal the purity of the man and woman was proved. Pregnancy during this time would reveal immorality, and the betrothal could be dissolved. An important fact is brought out in Matthew 1:18. It was during the betrothal period that Mary was found to be with child. We are told that it was through a work of

the Holy Spirit, but since Joseph did not know about this, we can understand his reaction to the news. He knew he was not the father; so it was best to simply end their betrothal before they were married.

6. What action was Joseph contemplating at this time (v. 19)?

For Joseph to continue with the relationship and marriage would implicate him as immoral also. There seemed to be no choice for him but to end the relationship. The custom of the time allowed him the option of making a public accusation or privately dismissing her. Since he was a godly man, he had no desire to subject Mary to public humiliation. A quiet, private act of divorce would suffice.

7. What characteristics in Joseph's life should we strive to develop as parents today?

Verse 19 describes Joseph as "just." Apparently he was a man who sought to do the right thing in all circumstances. Our world needs more people of integrity and strong character.

Joseph's decision to handle the situation decisively yet quietly shows not only great gentleness and compassion but also a determination to follow God's law. At such a time of confusion and hurt it would have been easy for him to react with anger and revenge.

Ephesians 5:22-33 sets forth what should be the primary goals of godly husbands and wives in a self-centered world that cares little for God. Joseph's humility, trust in God, and unwavering obedience also sets a powerful example for parents who would become quiet life-changers.

8. How did God communicate to Joseph about the situation, and what did He tell Joseph to do (vs. 20,21)?

As he brooded over the matter alone, his domestic prospects darkened and his happiness blasted for life, he began to plan the painful step of filing for divorce in the least offensive way. Then the Lord intervened" (Comfort, *New Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Tyndale). The phrase "while he thought on these things" indicates Joseph was a man of maturity, not willing to make hasty decisions. He gave serious thought to this important issue.

It was during that time of deliberation that God spoke to Joseph and revealed what was happening. This is a good lesson for us. When unexpected things happen, we often rush into action hastily, without taking time to contemplate and pray. That is the reason we sometimes make matters worse instead of better. While it is natural to become fearful and act quickly, spiritual maturity leads us to wait upon the Lord for guidance. Joseph appears to have taken time to allow God to give him direction before taking specific action.

God's message came through an angel in a dream. Joseph was told

that he did not need to be fearful and that he should proceed with the marriage. This was probably the answer to Joseph's concern about his reputation and what people would think if he did this. God explained that Mary was pregnant through a miraculous work of the Holy Spirit, that she would give birth to a son, that they were to name Him Jesus, and that He would save His people from their sins. Mary had not been immoral and was still a virgin, faithful to Joseph.

The virgin birth of Mary's son resulted in the perfect God-Man of undiminished deity and perfect humanity. He both preexisted and was born of a woman and as such lives today as the Saviour of all who receive Him.

Fulfillment to Obedience (Matthew 1:22-25)

9. What prophecy did Matthew quote to explain what God was doing (vs. 22,23)?

In verse 23 we find the first of many Old Testament quotes in the book of Matthew (cf. 2:15, 17-18, 23; 4:14-16; 8:17; 12:17-21; 13:35; 21:4-5; 27:9-10). It is from Isaiah 7:14, which is considered by Bible students to be the primary prophecy of the virgin birth. At this point in his writing, Matthew explained that everything that was happening to Mary was taking place in order to fulfill what Isaiah had written.

The combination of undiminished deity and perfect humanity can be seen in the name "Emmanuel," which means "God with us." God Himself was going to be dwelling among His people in the Person of Jesus, His Son. The truth being conveyed, therefore, is that Jesus is God. "Emmanuel" would not be the proper name by which He would be known. This name described His role among people rather than what people would call Him on a day-to-day basis. He was God in the flesh, God in a human body, come to save them from their sins.

As such Jesus would possess the same characteristics as other people, including emotions, feelings, and limited mobility. He would experience the same needs as other humans, specifically the need for eating, drinking, and sleeping. We read that at times Jesus hungered (Matt. 4:2; 21:18) and thirsted (John 19:28). He grew tired and needed rest (Matt. 8:24). Is it not encouraging to know that Jesus understands our daily needs, including things like hunger, tiredness, and discouragement?

The author of Hebrews put it this way: "For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin" (4:15). We can be assured that Jesus understands our basic feelings and emotional needs whenever they arise within us. He truly is our Friend, as well as our Saviour; and it is possible to enjoy fellowship with Him in the same way we enjoy it with visible friends.

At the same time, we must never forget that Jesus was much more than just a man; He is God. As such He deserves our highest

respect. Unlike human friends, Jesus has divine power and authority to assist us in our greatest needs. This challenges us to spend much time reading and studying the Gospels so that we can get to know Him better. Is He truly a personal and trusted Friend to you?

10. To some people the names and titles of Jesus and the doctrine of the virgin birth may seem like dry theological facts. In what ways should these things actually play a meaningful role in our life and obedience?

Verses 21-23 are the heart of this entire Bible story. At stake is the whole issue of Biblical unity and authority. All through the Old Testament, God had prophesied a Savior who would be born of woman (Genesis 3:15), be a descendant of Abraham (Genesis 22:18) and David (2 Samuel 7:12-16; Psalm 89:29), and be born of a virgin (Isaiah 7:14).

The name "Jesus" reminds us that He came to save us, and the title "Immanuel" assures us that God also wants to be "with us" in our struggles. The virginal conception helps establish that Jesus is fully God and fully human, and helps prove that God truly came to be with us. If God didn't care for us, why would He go to so much trouble?

11. What three things did Joseph do after he awoke from his dream (vs. 24,25)?

When Joseph awoke from his dream, he immediately obeyed what the angel had said. Three specific actions are recorded in these verses. First, we read that he took Mary as his wife as originally planned. He did not need further confirmation, for he knew he had heard from God. Since this was clearly God's will, there was nothing else to consider. If people thought badly about him, so be it. He would have the certain knowledge in his heart that he was doing what God wanted.

The godliness of Joseph becomes very clear to us at this point. It was very possible he would be misunderstood by family and friends alike and become an outcast in society. But the quiet assurance in Joseph's heart that he was acting according to the will of God led him to cease considering the possibility of divorce. God was doing a miraculous work, and though Joseph could not expect others to understand that, he knew he was right in God's eyes. He would stand alone, knowing his conviction.

The second thing Matthew recorded is that Joseph did not "know" Mary until after the birth of her firstborn son. We are familiar with the fact that "know" is a euphemism for sexual relations in this case. Matthew was not simply disclosing personal information; instead, he was informing us that even the marriage of Joseph and Mary did not cast doubt on the virgin birth of Jesus. The implication in the statement, however, is that after Jesus' birth they enjoyed a normal conjugal relationship.

The fact that Jesus was Mary's first-born is also important, of

course, because this reaffirms that she was a virgin when she conceived Him. Luke 2:7 also makes reference to this: "And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn." Matthew later wrote about His brothers and sisters (Matt. 12:46; 13:55,56).

The third thing Matthew recorded is that Joseph named Mary's son "Jesus," just as he had been commanded in the dream. This was a common name, but for this particular son it had special meaning. The Old Testament equivalent for the name is "Joshua" or "Hoshea." It means "Yahweh is salvation." He is also referred to as "Jesus, who is called Christ" (Matt. 1:16). "Christ" is an official title meaning "the Anointed One." It is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word "Messiah."

As we contemplate once again the birth of Jesus Christ, it is good to reflect upon the roles of Joseph and Mary. It is obvious that both were godly people even though they were young in years. When God reached into their lives to accomplish His will, He found submissive and obedient hearts willing to do whatever He wanted them to.

Perhaps God is doing a special work in your life. If you cooperate with Him in obedience, you will know a great satisfaction in being used to further His work

12. Joseph's role in the unfolding plan of God's redemption was quiet and unassuming, but vitally important. In what ways can God use our "small" acts of obedience in the larger plan of the kingdom of God?

Often as we live faithfully in our daily lives we forget how our seemingly mundane activities can have a huge impact on other people. By building a strong family heritage we may encourage a struggling young couple or even lay the groundwork for our own children or grandchildren to serve the kingdom of God in a significant way.

Our influence as Bible teachers or youth leaders can also mold and shape lives for all eternity. Our prayers offered in secret can open doors and influence circumstances across the globe. Your students undoubtedly can think of other ways!

CONCLUSION

Having a heart that seeks the heart and will of God above all else is vital! When we seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, we pay less attention to the pressures around us, and He takes care of our needs (Matthew 6:33). We must also remember that the people around us usually don't know or understand all the factors involved, as in the dramatic case of Joseph and Mary.

A sense of humility is also important. Humble people like Joseph

quietly take care of their responsibilities with little concern for fanfare, the limelight, or the approval of others. Joseph's example also teaches that there is no room for wavering as we focus on prompt obedience to God's leading. Three times in the book of Matthew Joseph is shown obeying God's call without a hint of delay (1:24; 2:14, 21).

When we obey God in life's difficult situations, we will find ourselves with God's solutions. Joseph was part of God's plan of salvation for the world. When we accept Jesus as our Saviour, we too are fulfilling God's plans for our lives. He does not want any of us to perish but all of us to go to heaven. Jesus is God's greatest gift to us. In Jesus, God gave the world a much needed Saviour.

PRAYER

Mighty God, who formed Jesus in the body of Mary, who revealed the circumstances to Isaiah seven hundred years earlier, who chose the faithful Joseph to rear Your own Son, to You we offer our amazement, our wonder, and our praise. May we be more like Joseph, acting with courage and grace to do Your will. In the name of Jesus we pray, amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Obedience to God is never a mistake.

ANTICIPATING NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

In our lesson next week we will see Jesus as the source of all our hope. Without Jesus the world has nothing worthwhile to live for. Jesus calls us to an abundant life of hope. Study Background Scripture Luke 2:22-38.

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