



Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for December 20, 2009
Released on Wednesday, December 16, 2009

"Emmanuel's Birth"

Lesson Text: Matthew 1:18-25

Background Scripture: Matthew 1:18-25

Devotional Reading: Galatians 4:1-7

Matthew 1:18–25

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.

Lesson Aims

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

- 1.** List the facts about the role Joseph played in the birth of Jesus the Messiah.
- 2.** Tell how Joseph is a model for men today who face difficult choices and want to act as "righteous" men.
- 3.** Write a commitment statement that pledges to obey even when God changes his or her plan.

Introduction

We sometimes get so caught up in the Christmas rush that we neglect to enjoy the season and reflect on its true meaning. Chuck Swindoll gave an example: "A lady had a circle of friends for whom she really wanted to buy Christmas presents. Time slipped away and it was so busy at work for her she just wasn't able to get to the store to purchase those gifts."

"She went to the local gift store and hurriedly went through the now picked over stack of cards and found a box of fifty, just exactly what she wanted. She didn't take time to read the message, she just noticed a beautiful cover on it.

"As New Year's came and she had time to go back to two or three cards she didn't send from that stack, she was shocked to read the message inside. It said, in a little rhyme, 'This Christmas card is just to say, a little gift is on its way'" (The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart, Swindoll Leadership Library).

Lesson Background

For most people, Christmas is just a time of presents and family get-togethers. Little attention is ever given to the real reason for all the celebration. Sadly, most people, including many believers, forget that Christmas is about God coming to live among people. Our lesson this week describes how the eternal God came to earth. Jesus is "Emmanuel," meaning "God with us."

Last week's lesson was about how Mary, the mother of Jesus, responded to the news that she was to give birth to Jesus Christ. This week we will be looking at how Joseph, the soon-to-be husband of Mary, came to hear about Jesus' birth. We will see that he too was a person of faith.

Taught by God (Matthew 1:18-21)

1. What were the three phases of Jewish marriages, and how far apart were they?

Unlike in today's society in which we date someone, fall in love, and become engaged to marry, marriages in New Testament days were arranged by the parents. Some cultures still use this practice.

This arrangement of marriage by the parents was sometimes made several years before the children reached marrying age. In most cases, the children had no say so over the matter; they were stuck with the person the parents selected. The children might have lived many years after this initial phase.

The second phase consisted of a formal, public ratification of the marriage agreement in front of witnesses. This did not mean that the young people lived together, but they were considered betrothed. We could consider this the engagement phase of the relationship, but unlike our engagement process, the betrothal process could only be terminated by death or divorce. Betrothal lasted a year, and the purpose of betrothal was to ensure the purity of the young virgin. If she became pregnant during this time, this was a sign of unfaithfulness on her part, and she could be stoned to death by the Mosaic Law (cf. Deut. 22:23,24).

The consummation of the marriage would occur when the bridegroom went to the home of the bride and took her to his home in a celebratory procession. The parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25:1-13 demonstrated this. The bridegroom is busy preparing a place for his bride, just like Jesus is preparing a place for us. The bride would not know when the bridegroom would come, so she had to be ready at all times, just like we must be ready for Jesus' return at any given moment.

2. What made Mary's pregnancy so shocking to Joseph? (v. 18)

We may find it difficult to understand the full impact of the statement that *Mary was espoused to Joseph*. It is during the espousal period that Joseph learns of Mary's pregnancy. For a woman in this position to be found pregnant means more than unfaithfulness to her fiancé. It means she has violated her marriage covenant; she (apparently) has committed adultery.

We know that Joseph was not with Mary during the time she became pregnant (v. 18). At this time, he could only conclude that Mary was with another man. Joseph probably had some anger, but he was more disappointed and sad to learn this news.

Matthew reassures us that this pregnancy is not the product of immorality, but of the *Holy Ghost*. But how do you prove such a claim? Mary's situation gives every indication of infidelity. This is far from what Joseph expected when the marriage was arranged. His honor is threatened. He is not likely to continue a marriage with an adulteress. Joseph is not likely to agree to take a wife from a father whose house is shamed by his daughter's (apparent) sexual sin.

3. When we are falsely accused, how much time and energy should we expend to clear our names, if any?

Mary and Joseph had to live with the stigma of an out-of-wedlock pregnancy, although neither had committed sexual immorality. Jesus made it clear that those who followed Him would be insulted, persecuted, and slandered. If the evil one cannot discredit the message of God, then he will attempt to discredit its messengers.

If someone privately makes you aware of a false accusation, then it may be wise to address the issue with that person, state the facts, and just let it go. Going on a public campaign to clear your name can be counterproductive in many cases. Peter tells us to keep a clear conscience so that those who slander us will eventually be ashamed of their lies (1 Peter 3:16). If we focus on what is factually true about ourselves, then what others may think of us, for good or ill, will matter less and less as the years go by.

4. What did Joseph do that demonstrated spiritual maturity? (v. 19)

The Law of Moses requires the execution of one who commits adultery (Leviticus 20:10). To do so definitely would be a "public example." This left Joseph with a real dilemma. For all he knew, she had been unfaithful to him. If he stayed with her, the implication would be that he was the one who had been immoral with her. He had no desire for revenge, however, because he was a godly man.

Matthew portrays Joseph as a man of honor. He is both *just* (righteous) and merciful. His righteous nature causes him to be kind to Mary despite her seeming betrayal.

To *put her away* means literally to "release" Mary from the marriage contract (compare Matthew 5:31). If he takes this action, Joseph will protect his honor, but shame will fall on Mary and her family, for such actions cannot be kept secret in a small village. Even so, Joseph is determined to do this *privily*. Even though the secret eventually will get out, Joseph will not be a party in making the issue public. There will be no street-corner proclamation of the divorce, as is sometimes done (compare John 8:3-5). This to be privately negotiated between Mary's father and Joseph.

5. How can the church do a better job of demonstrating grace to those going through an out-of-wedlock pregnancy, without seeming to condone premarital sex?

How tragic was the case of a young woman who got an abortion because she thought that Jesus was more likely to forgive her for killing her baby than her parents and congregation would be to forgive her for getting pregnant! If a woman makes a sinful decision that results in an out-of-wedlock pregnancy, then the church should treat her with the same grace that it is to show to anyone who is caught up in the consequences of personal sin. If done properly, helping people get their lives back together probably won't be seen as an endorsement of the behavior that got them into their predicaments.

6. How did God change Joseph's mind about divorcing Mary? (vs. 20, 21)

God intervenes before *Joseph* can act on his plan for divorcing *Mary*. Despite his expectation of shame, Joseph is told not to *fear* taking *Mary* as his *wife*. What has happened with *Mary* is not a sinful mistake. Joseph is to be part of a mighty act of God. Joseph will be an intimate witness to the powerful work of the Holy Spirit. The angel communicates God's approval for Joseph to receive *Mary* into his home. To obey God transcends any human issue of honor.

It is significant that this unnamed angel refers to Joseph as *thou son of David*. Just as Matthew will show that the pregnant virgin is a fulfillment of prophecy, so too is the ancestry of Joseph. The public assumption will be that the child is a natural son of Joseph; the reality will be that Joseph will be the legal (not biological) father. Even so, the arrival of Jesus will be a fulfillment of the promise to David of a descendant who will be the legitimate one to reign on David's throne (Isaiah 9:6, 7).

Joseph is given another assignment: that of naming the boy (Matthew 1:21). To do so is to recognize the child as his son (see Matthew 13:55). God knows that Jesus will need a good father and mother to prepare Him for the work that lies ahead. The choosing of Joseph and *Mary* for these roles speaks of God's view of their characters.

As we noted in last week's lesson, the name *Jesus* is equivalent to the Old Testament name *Joshua*. This is significant. Joshua was the Old Testament hero who led the nation of Israel into the promised land; Jesus will be God's servant to lead people to salvation (compare Romans 5:21; Hebrews 2:10). Names in the ancient world have meaning. Jesus/Joshua means "God is salvation" or "God is Savior." This meaning alludes to the angel's promise that *he shall save his people from their sins*.

7. What procedure should we use when we are about to make a decision that will have a lifelong impact?

Before Joseph could go through with his plan for divorce, he received a divine revelation in a dream. This indicates that he did not yield to an immediate, knee-jerk reaction when he first heard the news of *Mary's* pregnancy; instead, he apparently decided to "sleep on it" first. Even though we should not expect to receive divine messages in dreams, "sleeping on it" still may be wise.

Probably the worst time to make a decision about a crisis is when you are first hit with it. The emotions wrapped up in the initial stages of a difficult circumstance can make it almost impossible to make an effective decision about how to move forward. It's better to take as much time as is reasonably available to make a prayerful decision. A "strategic delay" in this regard also will allow one to gather wise counsel from those who are spiritually mature and who are not wrapped up in the emotional aspects of the problem.

8. Why is the virgin birth of Jesus so important?

"Jesus Christ, God's Son, had to be free from the sinful nature passed on to all other human beings by Adam. Because Jesus was born of a woman, He was a human being; but as the Son of God, Jesus was born without any trace of human sin. Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. The infinite, unlimited God took on the limitations of humanity so He could live and die for the salvation of all who believe in Him." (Osborne and Comfort, eds., *Life Application Bible Commentary*, Tyndale).

Obedient to God (Matthew 1:22-25)

9. Why did Matthew quote the Old Testament so much, and whom did he quote in verses 22 and 23?

One of the primary purposes behind Matthew's writing of his Gospel is to show Jesus as the one who fulfills the many Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah (see Matthew 5:17).

Matthew wrote his Gospel specifically to explain to his fellow Jews that Jesus was the promised Messiah foretold in the Old Testament and the King of Israel. Because of this, he included many quotations of Old Testament statements. His explanation of Jesus' birth was done so that his readers could see the fulfillment of prophecy in it. This quotation is the first of many and is found in Isaiah 7:14 (cf. Matt. 2:15, 17-18, 23; 4:14-16; 8:17; 12:17-21; 13:35; 21:4-5; 27:9-10).

10. What important truths should we glean from both Jesus' humanity and His deity?

The name "Emmanuel," which means, "God with us," tells us about the humanity and deity of Jesus. It was God Himself who, in the Person of Jesus Christ, was going to dwell among His people. This leads to the obvious conclusion that Jesus is God. This human was also divine. The name also describes His role among people. As God in the flesh, He had come to save them.

Hebrews 4:15 tells us that He is our high priest. He knows how we struggle with sin because he was tempted with sin in all points. He possesses all the qualities of humanity; this includes the emotions and feelings, along with taking on the limited mobility of humanity that is so different from what He is as God.

Jesus also experienced all the same physical needs we do. He got hungry and needed to eat (Matt. 4:2; 21:18). He got thirsty and needed to drink (John 19:28). He got tired and needed to sleep (Matt. 8:24). He became sad and heavy in spirit (23:37). He experienced anger toward people with no compassion (Mark 3:5). Is it not encouraging to us to know we have a Saviour who so fully understands all that we go through? This is why we find mercy and grace to help us when we experience times of need, both physical and spiritual.

While it is encouraging to us to realize His humanity and therefore His ability to identify with us in our needs, we must never forget Jesus' deity. It is also disrespectful to think of Jesus as no more than our "buddy." It is true that He is a friend (John 15:14-15), but He is a friend of a magnitude that put; Him far above all human friends. "What a Friend we have in Jesus, /All our sins and griefs to bear!" (Scriven). He Is God and deserves our utmost respect.

It should be understood that the name of Jesus Christ should never be used in a derogatory or cursing way. Sometimes Christians carelessly use the name of God as an exclamation ("O my God" or "Lordy"), and this is a habit we should break. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit have come to us to give us eternal life. Let us be deeply grateful to Them and as respectful as we can possibly be.

11. What did Joseph do upon waking, and what was the risk to him? (v. 24)

Upon waking, Joseph was immediately obedient to the angel. God had spoken so clearly, there was no reason to hesitate. Joseph knew that there would be people who would misunderstand his situation. But, he wouldn't let that stop him from obeying the voice of God. His godliness allowed him to obey the voice without hesitation. He had the quiet assurance that he was doing God's will.

12. What else did Joseph do following his dream? (v. 25)

Three specific actions by Joseph are recorded in these verses. First, he took Mary as his wife with no further delay. There was never again a thought as to whether he should end the relationship. God had spoken; Joseph would act accordingly and immediately. This godly example is one we would all do well to emulate. One of the statements pastors hear regularly is "I know what the Bible says, but you do not understand my situation. It is unique; so I need to do something different." If God's Word is clear, we must obey.

The second thing Joseph did was let Mary remain a virgin until after the birth of Jesus. The word "know" in Scripture in certain contexts a euphemism for sexual activity. Matthew informed his readers that the virginity of Mary was indeed a fact. She conceived while a virgin and gave birth while still a virgin. The virgin birth of Christ is of utmost importance to us because it assures us of His divine nature and ability to be our Saviour.

The third thing Joseph did was name his son Jesus, as both he and Mary had been instructed (cf. Luke 1:31). The name "Jesus" was a common one among Jewish people, but for this particular son it had a special meaning. The Old Testament name "Joshua" (or "Hosea") is equivalent to "Jesus," also meaning "Yahweh is salvation." Matthew also refers to Him as "Jesus, who is called Christ" in 1:16. "Christ" is Jesus' official title and means "the anointed one." This is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word "Messiah."

13. What can we learn from Mary and Joseph's situation?

We must remember that both Mary and Joseph were young when God called them towards their purpose. Mary was probably still a teenager, and Joseph wasn't probably much older. Despite their young age, this dynamic duo had remarkable spiritual maturity for their age. It was their obedience that allowed God to bring a Savior to save all mankind. Never underestimate the assignment God calls you to do. Who knows? Your obedience could have a great impact on humanity!

Conclusion

Honor as a controlling code still exists in some places today. One of those is the military, where soldiers are still given honorable or dishonorable discharges. A foundation for a sense of honor is to realize that irresponsible and immoral actions reflect on more than just the individual who commits them. Soldiers do not (or should not) want to bring dishonor on their unit, their branch of the service, or their country. In societies where honor is strong, dishonor taints an entire family.

Honor is different from pride. We can be glad for our honorable acts, but we should wince when we see people who seem to take pride in dishonorable acts. Excessive pride is toxic to our lives (see Proverbs 16:18). Honor, on the other hand, is often portrayed as the outcome of humility, the opposite of pride (see Proverbs 15:33; 29:23).

What if obedience to God's will asks us to do something that might be seen as shameful by our peers? We must remember that shame is relative to community standards. What is shameful in one community or culture may not be shameful in others. We can rest assured that God will never ask us to do something that He considers to be shameful.

It is at this point that the distinction between pride and honor must be remembered. Obeying God requires a denial of self, the opposite of pride. In today's lesson, Joseph had to swallow his pride and risk dishonor in order to obey. The verdict of history, however, is that Joseph was a man honored by God and deserving of our admiration. He sought to honor God by his obedience and was granted honor himself.

The truth is that our lack of obedience is much more likely to be a matter of pride than a matter of honor. May we take a lesson from Joseph, who sought to obey God regardless of the cost. No wonder God chose him to rear His Son!

Prayer

God in Heaven, we thank You for Your mighty provision for our salvation through Your Son, Jesus, born of a virgin in fulfillment of Your promise. We are humbled by

the choice of Joseph to be obedient even at the risk of dishonor. We pray that we will always choose obedience too. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

Thought to Remember

Joseph is still an example of obedience.

Anticipating Next Week's Lesson

Joseph moved Mary and Jesus out of the Bethlehem stable and into a house by the time the wise men came from the East. Their worship of Jesus and their gifts set the tone for His followers ever since. What happened to Herod for his murderous behavior toward babies exemplified the opposite.

Lesson Summarized By

Montario Fletcher

Jesus Is All Ministries

www.jesusisall.com

WORKS CITED:

Summary and commentary derived from Standard Lesson Commentary Copyright© 2009 by permission of Standard Publishing.

Reprinted by permission of The Incorporated Trustees of the Gospel Worker Society, Union Gospel Press, P.O. Box 6059, Cleveland, Ohio 44101. (Web site: <http://www.uniongospelpress.com/>)

The Pulpit Commentary, Spence-Jones, H. D. M. (Hrsg.), Bellingham, WA : Logos Research Systems, Inc.

The KJV Parallel Bible Commentary, by Nelson Books