



Sunday School Lesson for December 21, 2003.  
Released on December 18, 2003

Study Matthew 1:18-25. Jesus: God with Us  
Questions and answers below.

TIME: 6 or 5 B.C.  
PLACE: Nazareth

### **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 Background**

Even before Jesus' birth was announced, there was speculation everywhere in first-century Palestine about the coming Messiah -much of it misguided. Some Jews expected two different Messiahs, one a teacher and one a warrior. On more than one occasion pretenders incited Jewish enthusiasts to believe that the Messiah had come and it was time to march on the Romans (compare Acts 5:35-38).

But Matthew establishes that Jesus is no pretender. Matthew was appealing to the Jews by presenting Jesus as the King and Messiah of Israel. He alone has the credentials to sit on David's throne as the messianic promises foretold, and His ministry will proclaim the pure Word of God as would be expected of One truly sent from above.

After presenting a genealogy that establishes Jesus' credentials through the royal line of David, Matthew turns to the details of the birth of Jesus. The drama of the

story is unfolded in such a way as to show clearly how the Lord God acted in this event to bring Jesus into the world and protect Him from the forces of evil that stood against Him.

**Joseph's Dilemma  
(Matthew 1:18,19)  
Mary's Pregnancy (v. 18)**

**1. What three important facts in Matthew 1:18 set the stage for what happened next?**

First, we are told that Mary was espoused to Joseph. They were in the engagement period when they were still living with their own parents but considered to be husband and wife. Second, we are told that it was "before they came together"; that is, they were not living together and had not had a physical relationship. Third, Mary was found to be pregnant and had been made so by a work of the Holy Spirit.

We can understand what occurred. At that time, however, Joseph had no knowledge of the Holy Spirit's role in Mary's pregnancy.

**2. Why was Joseph in such confusion when he heard about Mary's condition?**

The only conclusion Joseph could arrive at after hearing of Mary's condition was that she had been immoral and unfaithful to him during their espousal period. Maybe he concluded this had taken place during the time Mary was away visiting Elisabeth (Luke 1:56). We cannot begin to imagine the pain and sorrow Joseph experienced upon hearing this information. Neither can we begin to imagine how traumatic this was for Mary as she realized she had to break the news of her condition to Joseph.

How could Mary expect Joseph to understand that she was expecting a baby without ever having had a physical relationship with a man? Her only recourse was to leave everything in God's hands and trust that His will would be accomplished. This would certainly test the character of Joseph, for he would have to rely on spiritual guidance during the uncertainty he faced. If he reacted out of human understanding alone, he would prove to be spiritually shallow. It was a time of testing such as none of us has faced.

**3. How do we know that Joseph was "a just man" (v. 19)?**

The fact that Joseph is a just man implies that he is concerned to meet the situation of Mary's pregnancy in accordance with his sense of duty before God. He realizes that he is unable to take Mary as his wife under the conditions of her pregnancy, since from his perspective she must have committed adultery with another man. He knows the regulations in Deuteronomy 22:23-27 require a death sentence for Mary. Even though Roman occupation of Israel prevents the Jews from exercising the death penalty, Joseph can still publicly humiliate Mary as an adulteress.

Instead, Joseph can present Mary with a bill of divorce in the presence of a few witnesses in accordance with Deuteronomy 24:1-4, since an engagement is as legally binding as a marriage. He chooses this more private course of action to meet his obligations before the law, while at the same time sparing Mary the public disgrace.

So Joseph must react to a situation about which he has neither been warned nor prepared. His sense of obedience to God motivates him to respond to Mary's pregnancy in the most appropriate way he can think of. His knowledge of God's law and his desire to "do the right thing" by Mary serve as his guiding lights. But we can only guess at the inner turmoil that such events create within him. Nevertheless, Joseph's reaction allows us to gain some insight into how faith in our all-knowing God can be useful for times such as these.

### **God's Direction (Matthew 1:20-23)**

#### **4. How did God stop Joseph from quietly divorcing Mary (v. 20)?**

Joseph apparently did not come to important conclusions without intense consideration. It was while he was giving deep thought to the whole situation that an angel came to him with a message from God. The angel appeared in a dream. We recognize some spiritual maturity in Joseph because of the way he had handled the situation so far. The natural tendency is to act quickly when we hear distressing news. At such times it is difficult to keep our spirits quiet and simply wait upon God for His direction.

That appears, however, to be exactly what Joseph was doing. As he took time to deliberate, he gave God time to supply the guidance needed to enable him to fulfill His will. When God's will was made known to Joseph, it was unmistakably clear. He was to go ahead with the wedding plans with no fear of what repercussions might follow. If he had been concerned about his own reputation, he was to put that aside and trust God to take care of things for him. If he had to bear reproach, at least he knew he would be right with God.

The angel then explained that Mary's condition was due to a work of the Holy Spirit. This was why Joseph could pursue the wedding without being concerned about what people might think; God was directly involved in this matter and was directing the entire situation. That does not always mean it is easy to continue to follow the Lord. There will be times when we know God is leading us in a certain direction that will be misunderstood by others. The important thing is to do His will.

#### **5. What name was Joseph to give the Son to be born to Mary, and what reason did God give for choosing this name (v. 21)?**

The angel specified that Mary was going to give birth to a son, but that son was going to be a son unlike any ever born before. He was to be named "Jesus," the Greek equivalent to the Old Testament name "Joshua." The name means "the Lord saves," and in this case it was meant to communicate to the world that salvation was being made available to the inhabitants of earth. For Jesus would "save his people from their sins."

Romans 5:18,19 says, "Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous." This is a clear description of the fact that because of Adam's sin, all people are condemned for eternity unless some provision can be made to save them. Condemnation came through just one man and affected all of us.

The passage also makes it clear that salvation has been made available through one man and that man is Jesus Christ. Any of us can be made righteous because He obediently went to the cross and paid the penalty for our sins. The Bible teaches that when we accept Him, believing He is the Son of God who came to be our Saviour, we will have our sins forgiven. We can then be certain of going to heaven when we leave earth.

## **6. What was Matthew's purpose in stating "all this was done" (v. 22)?**

God is concerned about details. Matthew wrote that "all this was done" in order to completely fulfill what God had said. Every detail was necessary in the provision for man's salvation. Mary had to become pregnant before she had a relationship with Joseph because this was going to be a birth unlike any in the history of the world. Joseph had to accept her condition because God was accomplishing His eternal purposes through her. The Holy Spirit had to be involved for the same reasons.

The terms fulfill and fulfilled are very important in Matthew's Gospel. They appear numerous times to describe how Old Testament predictions are reaching fruition (e.g., Matthew 2:15, 17, 23). Matthew's theme of fulfillment makes it clear that the gospel message has its roots in Old Testament events and promises.

## **7. What prophet did Matthew quote, and what did he emphasize (v. 23)?**

This prophetic quotation—more than seven hundred years old!—comes from Isaiah 7:14. The original context is the prophecy spoken by Isaiah to King Ahaz of Judah when he was threatened with attack. To defeat this attack, King Ahaz was considering asking for Assyrian help when the Lord commanded him (through Isaiah) to put his trust in the Lord instead. Isaiah offered King Ahaz a sign that would confirm that God would keep His promise that Jerusalem would go unharmed if the king would depend on the Lord. When King Ahaz refused to ask for a sign, Isaiah gave him one anyway, saying, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14).

Naturally we may ask just how the prediction of the birth of a child to a virgin would have represented a sign to King Ahaz over seven hundred years earlier! We can answer this question by realizing that prophecies in the Old Testament can be understood either as "predictions that persuade people immediately" (as in Exodus 4:8,9), or as sweeping statements to serve as "future confirmations" of something (as in Exodus 3:12).

In the case of King Ahaz the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 fits the second of these two, since Ahaz will be long dead by the time Jesus is born. Isaiah in his day sees destruction coming not just to Ahaz in particular, but also for "the house of David" in general (Isaiah 7:2,13), resulting in the loss of the throne. Long after King David's dynasty has ended, it will be Jesus, born to a virgin and born of David's line, who comes to carry the government of God's people upon His shoulders (Isaiah 9:6). Jesus is the one for whom the nation waits. He is the "confirmation" of the truth of Isaiah's words.

Those who faithfully await the arrival of the Messiah will gladly call his name Immanuel . . . God with us. What better blessing could one ask for than to know that God wants to dwell with His people? (See also Isaiah 60:18-20; Revelation 21:3). Jesus made all of this possible for believers when He left His eternal glory to put on flesh and come to earth to die for our sins. He promises to include His people in a

great banquet at the end of time when again He will be with us in glory (Revelation 19:6-9).

**8. The prophecy from Isaiah 7:14 reveals God's patience in developing His plan over hundreds of years, even with a rebellious people. In what ways has God been patient with you?**

Ask for volunteers to talk about rebellious periods in their lives, times when God was "right there" when they eventually decided to turn back to him (2 Peter 3:9). Caution your learners that we should take care not to interpret God's patience as "tolerance" in the modern sense that sees God as accepting all attitudes and behaviors as equally valid. The Bible makes clear that a day will come when God's patience with sinful humans will come to an end.

**9. Why is the virgin birth of Jesus so important to mankind?**

We cannot overemphasize the importance of the virgin birth of Jesus Christ. It was prophesied in the Old Testament, fulfilled in the New, and accomplished through a direct work of God's Holy Spirit. Since humanity had become tainted with sin because of Adam's fall, resulting in the lost condition of mankind, a pure and holy sacrifice was needed for the payment of sin. Only one born as Jesus was could provide the pure sacrifice that would accomplish such a payment. We should thank God for this miraculous provision.

**Joseph's Obedience  
(Matthew 1:24,25)  
He Takes Mary as His Wife (v. 24)**

**10. How did Joseph respond after he awoke from his unusual dream (v. 24)?**

Joseph's response to the angel of the Lord is immediate. As soon as he awakens from sleep Joseph moves with obedience to the Lord's command. The message that has been revealed showed Joseph that taking Mary to be his wife is exactly the Lord's will. He wed Mary and gave no further thought to how others might view the situation.

Can you imagine the relief and joy Mary felt when Joseph told her what he planned to do? It is true that she was trusting God with the situation, but she probably had her moments of doubt and concern about it, just as we would have had. After all, she was not supernatural! Joseph would also have experienced the joy that comes from being obedient to God. What an outstanding example he is of obedience to God! As soon as God's will is known, it should be obeyed.

We must realize that Joseph and Mary so willingly did as God wanted because they were godly people before being tested. Since they lived in fellowship with Him on a daily basis, they were able to follow His perfect will when the time of testing came. What we should learn from this is the importance of our daily relationship with God. Only a consistent walk with Him will prepare us for those unexpected situations that often arise.

## **11. What does Matthew mean by "knew her not" (v. 25)?**

"Knew her not" is Matthew's way of making it clear that the conception of this unique baby was not the result of any marital union between the parents. Joseph respects the initiative of God in the life of his spouse so much that even after their marriage is ceremonially inaugurated he delays the normal marital relationship with Mary. Thus Joseph brings Mary into his house, but continues to treat her sexually as if the relationship were in the premarital engagement phase until after the time of Jesus' birth.

The word "till" is significant because it indicates a change that takes place after the birth of Jesus-the picture is that of Joseph and Mary in a normal married relationship, which includes a sexual relationship as God intends.

Joseph and Mary named the boy Jesus as they had been instructed. This was a popular name in biblical days, but what separated this Jesus from all others is the truth given in Matthew 1:16. Here Matthew wrote, "Jacob begot Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ." "Christ" is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew "Messiah." The title means anointed and it separated Jesus from all others as the Anointed One from God.

Our world continues in a desperately sinful condition, and the need for a Savior has never diminished. As we celebrate the birth of Jesus once again, let us thank God from the depths of our hearts for providing salvation for us through Him. Emphasize the true meaning of the season this year as never before. Without His coming, we all would be hopelessly lost in sin and bound for eternal separation from God.

## **CONCLUSION**

The message of Christmas is one of the greatest messages ever given to humanity. It tells us that our God loved us so much that He would not leave us without hope. That hope came in the form of Jesus our Messiah, who gave up the glories of heaven so that He could be with us on earth. The gift of salvation came through Jesus alone.

The birth of Jesus came about in a most extraordinary way! But the parents of Jesus were ordinary people whose faith served them well in extraordinary circumstances. They were obviously not expecting to meet such challenges during those days when the happy couple planned together for sharing a lifetime of marriage. But their faith in the Lord was firm from the very start. As a result, their decisions could be made in a context of obedience to God's will as that will became progressively obvious to them.

Modern believers also face challenges as we make decisions about important issues. Mary and Joseph teach us to trust in the Lord to guide us even as we wonder what is coming next. What is really around the next corner-no one knows! But whatever it is the Lord has in store for us, we can submit ourselves to Him. We realize that our God "knows what He is doing." Often we will live to see how it all makes sense in light of God's bigger plans.

## **PRAYER**

All-knowing God, we ask forgiveness where our own blindness has prevented us from meeting new challenges with faith and obedience. Lead us through the surprises of life, and please pardon us where we fail to trust You. Empower us to meet those future challenges that await us. In the name of Your Son who saves His people from their sins, amen.

**THOUGHT TO REMEMBER**

He will always show us "why"-if not in this life, then in the next.

**ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON**

Our lesson next week deals with Jesus' early years. We learn how Jesus grew both physically in stature and in His inner being. Most of all, He grew in His relationship with both God and man. Study Luke 2:40-52.

Have a Blessed Christmas !

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