

Matthew 1:18-25

¹⁸This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. His mother, Mary, was pledged in marriage to Joseph. Before they came together, she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Joseph, her husband, was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her. So he decided to divorce her privately. ²⁰But as he was considering these things, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

²²All this happened to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³“Look, the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son. And they will name him Immanuel,” which means, “God with us.”

²⁴When Joseph woke up from his sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him. He took Mary home as his wife, ²⁵but he was not intimate with her until she gave birth to her firstborn son. And he named him Jesus.

An Unusual Birth

I.

He was not a high-powered man. Then, even as now, far too many of those who considered themselves the intellectual elites would have never even given him a moment's thought. He worked in the skilled trades. The highbrow in society often look down their noses at those who come to build or repair their homes and the things inside them. When the tradesman is called in to perform service, the self-identifying elite assumes the skilled tradesman knows little outside his trade, and tries to cheat him by underpaying for his service.

This particular tradesman had even more strikes against him. He lived in the wrong place. No one of importance was from there. Everyone, regardless of trade or skill or knowledge was looked down on. To borrow a phrase, his home was just on the wrong side of the tracks.

He was not a rich man, but he could make a living. Everyone needed his kind of skill, for he was a carpenter. There is always something that needs to be done, whether the work could be brought to the shop, or whether it was something he had to load up the tools on the cart to go onsite to do the work.

Though he didn't really have much money, Joseph was betrothed. Back then things worked a little differently than they do these days. To get engaged required the prospective groom to pay a bride price. Things were agreed on by the bride's father. The betrothal wasn't the big wedding ceremony with the gifts and the wine and the party that would sometimes last for days—all of that would come later. But the betrothal—the engagement—was tantamount to marriage. In the eyes of God, the couple had pledged themselves to one another for life.

Despite the pledge to be united in marriage, that did not allow the couple to live together or to be sexually intimate with one another. They were to maintain their celibacy until after they were officially married. As much as the Bible talks about sexual sins, I would imagine people violated the terms of what God wanted all the time, even back in early New Testament times.

Joseph, however, was a righteous man, and did not violate the pledge or the letter of God's laws in this matter. He would wait for the marriage to be official.

“This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. His mother, Mary, was pledged in marriage to Joseph. Before they came together, she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:18, EHV). While Joseph was “just” a skilled tradesman, he wasn't stupid. The elites might make that mistake about those they *think* are of a lowly estate, but intelligence often has little impact on the profession an individual chooses. Joseph knew a little something about pregnancy. Pregnancy takes two people.

Mary had already been visited by an angel. The angel told her: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called

the Son of God” (Luke 1:35, EHV). Do you think Mary had mentioned this special visit to Joseph? I would imagine so.

II.

“Joseph, her husband, was a righteous man” (Matthew 1:19, EHV). Joseph had to ask himself a couple of questions. Did he believe his bride-to-be? One thing Joseph knew beyond a shadow of a doubt: *he* had not been one of the two people required to make a baby. But, being a righteous man, Joseph would have known his Old Testament prophecies. He would have known the prophecy that was our First Lesson for today; “Therefore the LORD himself will give you all a sign. Look! The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and call his name Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14, EHV).

Christmas is a Mary-Jesus thing, not a Joseph-Jesus thing. Christmas carols speak mainly about Mary and Jesus, not many mention Joseph. Joseph winds up in the background. He’s somewhere back with the shepherds and the angels who appeared to them in the fields and the Wise Men.

“Joseph, her husband, was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her. So he decided to divorce her privately” (Matthew 1:19, EHV). Joseph had his doubts about Mary’s story. He knew of the prophecy that a virgin would give birth to the Messiah, but he didn’t believe her when his bride told him she was the chosen one. It didn’t seem logical. She wasn’t from a prominent family. Perhaps he forgot his Bible history. David wasn’t from a prominent family originally, either, yet now the family line of David was the line from whom the Messiah would come. Both Mary and he, himself, were of that family line.

In Matthew’s gospel, Christmas begins with Joseph’s dilemma about what to do with a wife-to-be whom he thinks is carrying another man’s child. In the circumstances in which he found himself, Joseph had every right to make a big deal out of this situation. He could embarrass Mary publicly and humiliate her. The consequences for unfaithfulness back in those days was not pleasant. It was death by stoning (Deuteronomy 22:23-24). While Joseph didn’t seem to believe the story Mary told, he still loved her and did not want her to be subject to such punishment. Joseph chose the form of divorce the Old Testament laws allowed which was to divorce without cause.

III.

“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:20-21, EHV). A visit from the angel in his dream gave Joseph exact and precise confirmation of what Mary had already told him. She *was* the one to be the mother of the Messiah. She had *not* been unfaithful to him.

“All this happened to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³ ‘Look, the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son. And they will name him Immanuel,’ which means, ‘God with us’” (Matthew 1:22-23, EHV).

Back in those days, people would soon know Mary was pregnant. The little town the two were living separately in wasn’t very big—just a few hundred people. Once her condition became apparent, the tongues would start to wag. She wouldn’t be able to get away. Women rarely traveled alone, so he couldn’t send her off by herself. If the Child Joseph now understood to be Immanuel was born seemingly-illegitimate he would have a difficult time convincing people he was, indeed, the Messiah.

“When Joseph woke up from his sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him. He took Mary home as his wife, ²⁵but he was not intimate with her until she gave birth to her firstborn son. And he named him Jesus” (Matthew 1:24-25, EHV). Joseph woke up from his instructional dream and followed the instructions of the angel to the letter. Long before he might otherwise have done so, Joseph took Mary home as his wife. With the two of them living together

as fully married husband and wife, the pregnancy would raise less eyebrows. While he wasn't Jesus' biological father, Joseph would become the man identified by others as Jesus' father—he would be the *legal* father. Everything is done so they could get together within the nine-month limit.

We tend to relegate Joseph to a minor role in our Christmas celebrations, but in many ways he had a major part. He followed God's directions in this dream, but this wasn't the last time. Joseph had another dream, and fled with Mary and the baby Jesus to Egypt to save the Christchild's life. Years later, there was another dream, to leave Egypt and return to their home in Galilee. Still another dream, on the way back to Galilee, instructed Joseph to avoid Judea and the murderous Herod who was still there, as they returned home to Galilee.

While the Christmas story might begin with Joseph doubting Mary's story, it ends with him acting as a hero of the faith. Joseph protected Mary and Jesus as the guardian of the Holy Child born to be the Savior of the world.

IV.

Life seems to be a series of dilemmas. Joseph faced a dilemma of what to do with a seeming-unfaithful wife. When God got him through that dilemma, he was really resolving the dilemma faced by every human being: what to do about sin. God saved all people from eternal death and Satan's power. All this Mary's child could do because he was truly "Jesus," which means "God saves us." He truly was "Immanuel," "God with us," as Isaiah prophesied and Matthew announced as fulfilled in Jesus.

The Messiah was to be King David's descendant. For all legal purposes, Jesus was a son of Joseph, and therefore a descendant of David. Since Mary was also a descendant of King David, Jesus was also a Son of David by blood, not just by law. The prophecies were fulfilled. The Savior born to Mary was truly God and truly human. Through Jesus' perfect life, innocent death, resurrection, and ascension, we have been set free from the bonds of sin. Immanuel—God with us, Jesus—God saves us, has completed the mission of our salvation.

As for Joseph, his name does not figure prominently in the New Testament. Still, his legacy lives on in other things besides being Jesus' legal father. James, the oldest brother of Jesus, became the bishop of Jerusalem and the author of a New Testament book. Jude, another son of Joseph, also wrote a book of the Bible.

Jesus once said that his mother and brothers and sisters were all those who did the will of his Father in believing that he was the Christ. All those who believe, along with Joseph, constitute the household of God.

Joseph once doubted and wondered about what he had been told by Mary when they were just engaged. Yet the Lord led him through those doubts to see and understand the goodness of God—not just to him and his family, but to all families and every nation of people on earth.

So many heroes of the faith in the Bible are shown to have had very human doubts and fears. Their doubts and fears mimic our own. When our prayers aren't answered as quickly as we would like, or in the manner we want, we wonder whether God hears and answers prayer. The Bible is filled with all kinds of teachings that challenge our sensibilities. How can it be that Jesus is truly, 100% God, and truly, 100% human? But he tells us it is so. We learn from Scripture that God is righteous and demands perfection from us to enter heaven; yet, he knew we couldn't deliver perfection, so he, himself, gave us the means to have it as our own, as a free gift of his grace. While we don't understand, we just believe.

We continue to face dilemmas in life. We struggle with our human intellect through our doubts and fears. Yet, in this Christmas season, we look at the example of Joseph. Put aside your doubts and fears, as he did. Also follow Mary's example and treasure up all these things and ponder them in your hearts. God bless your Christmas worship of your Lord and King this week. Amen.