

Matthew 1:18-21 “A Message for Joseph about the King”^{**}

Main Idea: In Matthew 1:18-25 Matthew highlights an angel’s interaction with Joseph to teach us about the unique identity and purpose of the Christ-child. There are four scenes in the story, and we’ll consider the first three this week, and the fourth next week.

- I. We see Joseph’s discovery (18).
 - A. Joseph and Mary were betrothed.
 - B. Joseph and Mary were pure.
 - C. Joseph found out Mary was pregnant.
- II. We see Joseph’s dilemma (19).
 - A. Because he was righteous, he felt he needed to end the marriage.
 - B. Because he was loving, he didn’t want to hurt Mary.
- III. We see Joseph’s dream (20-21).
 - A. The angel called him David’s son.
 - B. The angel told him not to fear.
 - C. The angel told him to take Mary as his wife.
 - D. The angel told him that the child was conceived by the Holy Spirit.
 - E. The angel told him that Mary was going to have a son.
 - F. The angel told him to name the son Jesus.
 - G. The angel told him what this son was going to do.
 1. Our biggest problem is sin.
 2. Our only hope is to be saved.
- IV. We see Joseph’s decision (22-25).

Make It Personal: Ask yourself these questions...

1. What do you think about Jesus?
2. What are you doing with Jesus?
3. What decision in your life would most honor King Jesus this week?

Most of us have heard the words so many times that the truth they present often goes right past us. *God became a man.* Say that again? *God*—the greatest being there is, the One who created all that exists and holds the stars in His hands. *God...became a man.* He became what we are. The Infinite One became finite. The Creator became a creature.

How can that be? And why? To help us appreciate the significance of the incarnation, God tells us this incredible story from the perspective of several eyewitnesses. The Bible tells us what Mary saw and how she reacted, the same for the shepherds, and the angels, and a woman named Anna, and a man named Simeon, and later, even some wise men.

But there’s someone, in my estimation, that’s often overlooked in the Christmas story. Yet this man has a lot to say to us about the miracle of the incarnation and the difference it should make in our lives. It sure changed his life.

I’m talking, of course, about Joseph. Did you realize that in the gospel records, Joseph never speaks? And yet he has so much to say to us, not with words, but with action.

This month we’re learning about the Christ-child from Matthew’s account in a series I’m calling, *A King Like No Other*. Last time we looked at Jesus’ genealogy in Matthew 1:1-17, and learned that what at first glance just looks like a list of names is in reality a gospel presentation. With those names Matthew *about God* (that He works with individuals, through a chosen family, by grace, according to His sovereign plan, and through incarnation), *about Christ* (that He is a real man, that He is more than a man, that He is the fulfillment of God’s covenant with Abraham and God’s covenant with David), and *about what we need* (we need a Savior to rescue us and a King to rule us).

^{**}Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

This morning we come to Matthew's birth narrative in Matthew 1:18-25. Here Matthew highlights Joseph's interaction with an angel to teach us about the unique identity and purpose of the God-man. There are four scenes in the story, and we'll consider the first three this week, and the fourth next week.

I. We see Joseph's discovery (18).

Verse 18 "This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about." Matthew uses the Greek word *genesis*, so literally he's giving us the "the *genesis* of Jesus."

There are actually two birth accounts in the Bible. Let's take a look at the other for a moment. It's in Luke 1-2.

According to Luke's account we learn that the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary during the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy with John (1:26ff). This meeting with Mary happened in Nazareth in Galilee. Gabriel told Mary she was going to have a son, and that her son would be called "The Son of the Most High" (Luke 1:32), and that the Lord would give him "the throne of his father David," and said "his kingdom will never end" (Luke 1:32-33).

Also according to Luke, right after Gabriel's appearance, Mary traveled sixty or so miles from Nazareth to a town in the hill country of Judea where she spent the first three months of her pregnancy with her relative, Elizabeth (Luke 1:56). When she first entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth, the baby John leaped in the womb and Elizabeth exclaimed, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear (Luke 1:42)!"

Mary left Judea about the time baby John was born and returned to Nazareth. When she arrived home, she was probably a little over three months pregnant. I don't know if she was showing yet, but it wasn't long before people took notice that she was carrying a child.

Luke tells us another important detail. He tells us that not long after Mary returned home to Nazareth, Caesar Augustus, the Roman emperor, ordered that a census be taken of all his subjects. As a result, everyone had to return "to his own town to register (Luke 2:3)." For Joseph and Mary, that meant heading south to Bethlehem in Judea. And that meant that Mary made two trips to Judea that year while pregnant, one during her first trimester and the other apparently during her final trimester.

You know the rest of the story, presented in Luke 2, how that while they were in Bethlehem the time came for Mary to deliver, how that since there was no room in the inn Mary had to place her firstborn in a manger, how the shepherds came, and how eight days later the couple traveled to Jerusalem to circumcise their son and offer Mary's purification sacrifice.

But as we'll see today, Matthew doesn't give us those details. No mention of the angel's visit to Mary, no mention of Elizabeth and her baby, little John the Baptist, no mention of the manger and the visit by the shepherds.

Why doesn't Matthew tell us those things? He says he's telling us "how the birth of Jesus Christ came about." How could he omit such details?

For that matter, Luke doesn't mention the magi's visit, nor Herod's massacre of the baby boys, nor the young family's escape trip to Egypt, while Matthew does.

What's up with these differences? What's up is that Matthew and Luke have different agendas for writing their gospel accounts. Luke, probably a Gentile by birth and a man educated in Greek culture, is presenting Jesus with the Gentile reader in mind. And Matthew, a Jew by birth, has Jewish readers in mind, at least initially.

That's what this selectivity is all about. They can't write everything. So Luke includes material that features Jesus' humanity, a key issue for Greek thinking Gentiles,

while Matthew highlights His royalty, a huge concern for Jews. Luke wants us to know Jesus is the Son of Man and the Savior of the world, while Matthew wants us to know that Jesus is the Jews' long-awaited Messiah and king, and that He's not just for the Jews, but for the world too.

And while Luke focuses on Mary, Matthew puts the spotlight on Joseph. The first thing Matthew highlights is Joseph's discovery.

Notice verse 18, "This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit." Matthew tells us three things here.

A. Joseph and Mary were betrothed. The KJV says Mary was "espoused to Joseph." Barclay explains how marriage worked for first century Jews. There were three steps. First, there was the *engagement period*, which began with an arranged marriage that often happened when the groom and bride to be were only children. As Barclay explains, "Marriage was held to be far too serious a step to be left to the dictates of the human heart."¹ Sort of blows the plot line for most chick flicks today, but this is how it worked back then.

After the engagement period came the *betrothal period*. It lasted one year and is similar to what we think of today as engagement, except that for the Jews the betrothed couple was considered legally married. They were husband and wife though they still lived in separate homes and had no physical union. To end the betrothal period, you either had to culminate the marriage, die, or divorce.

After so, after the one year betrothal came the *marriage proper*. At that point the husband took his wife to his home and they consummated their marriage with physical union. "Only then was sexual intercourse proper," concludes Carson.

That final statement sounds odd to our modern ears, doesn't it? "Sexual intercourse, proper only in marriage? How archaic! They sure didn't understand sexual freedom back then, did they? You see, we love each other. Why can't we show it? We don't need a piece of paper, do we?"

The truth is, sex before marriage and outside of marriage, while it promises freedom, actually produces bondage. And I've counseled person after person who can testify to that fact. Friends, God is pro-sex. He created it. And He created it to be enjoyed by a man and a woman who have purposed to reserve its enjoyment within the bonds of a marriage covenant relationship.

Joseph and Mary made that commitment. Not only were they were betrothed...

B. Joseph and Mary were pure. Matthew emphasizes that "before they came together," before there was any sexual union. You see, this was a God-fearing, Bible-obeying couple, and Matthew wants us to know that the child we're about to meet was not Joseph's biological son, nor was He the son of any human being. In verse 23 Matthew says, "The *virgin* will be with child." That's why she's called *the Virgin Mary*, and it's called the miracle of the *virgin birth*, a miracle we'll ponder more carefully next time. It was at this point, thirdly, that...

C. Joseph found out Mary was pregnant. Verse 18 says "she was found to be with child." *Was found*, in other words, she started showing. *To be with child*. The Bible says she was "with child." The angel told her, "You will be *with child* and give birth to a son (Luke 1:31)." Elizabeth told her, "Blessed is *the child* you will bear (Luke 1:42)."

When does a child become a child? After he or she is born? Notice the Scriptures refer to Jesus as a child and He is months away from seeing the manger in Bethlehem.

¹ William Barclay, p. 19.

Friends, according to God’s Word, a child is a child whether in the womb or outside of it. When you read passages like Psalm 139, you see that human life begins at conception, a reality that is under attack in our day.

Last week I heard on the news they’re trying to make it legal for a 16 year old, without a prescription, to obtain the “day after pill” so she can eliminate the little one she has conceived. She has a right to choose, so we’re told. But what about the child’s choice? We’ve been hearing great public outcry recently against adults who are accused of doing unthinkable things against defenseless little children, and rightfully so. Where’s the outcry in behalf of the unborn children? That’s what they are. Whether we can see them or not, the little one in the womb is a *child*.

Joseph learned another important detail. The angel told him that Mary was with child “through the Holy Spirit.” Matthew uses the Greek preposition *ek*, which can mean “by” or “out of” (the KJV says “of the Holy Ghost”) or “from” (as in the ESV and the NRSV).

What did that mean to a first century Jew like Joseph? Remember, he didn’t have NT texts like John 16 and Acts 2 to explain the Holy Spirit. He had only the Hebrew Bible, and when he heard about the Holy Spirit his mind surely raced to the first two verses of the Bible where the Holy Spirit is presented as the agent of creation.

We read in Genesis 1:1–2, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.² Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.”

Interesting, isn’t it? We see the Holy Spirit working at the beginning of Genesis, and now likewise we see the Holy Spirit working at the *genesis* of Jesus Christ. Bruner points out that the One who began the world’s *creation* now generates the world’s *salvation*.²

So there’s scene one, Joseph’s discovery. When we come to scene two...

II. We see Joseph’s dilemma (19).

Verse 19 says, “Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.” Here was Joseph’s dilemma...

A. Because he was righteous, he felt he needed to end the marriage. Yet...

B. Because he was loving, he didn’t want to hurt Mary. You see, Joseph knew his Bible. He knew that according to God’s law, if a betrothed woman became pregnant, it was considered adultery, and the men of her town were to stone her (Deut. 22:13-21). He also knew Deuteronomy 24:1, which said, “If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house...”

So in Joseph’s eyes, getting a divorce was the *righteous* thing to do. As a law-keeper, he felt he needed to end the marriage. The only question is how, though public action, even stoning, or with a private divorce certificate?

By contrast, marriages today often end, not for righteous reasons, but for personal ones. “I don’t feel anything for him anymore.” “She doesn’t make me happy.” “We’re not compatible.” Those aren’t biblical reasons, and therefore, are *unrighteous* reasons to break a marriage covenant, and with God’s help, those challenges can be overcome.

But Joseph illustrates for us that there are *righteous* reasons to divorce, two biblical reasons, and they both have to do with situations where one party does something that, in essence, violates the marriage bond. One is desertion (1 Cor 7:7:15). The other is adultery (Matt 19:9). Though God desires marriages to last until death, He says that

² Bruner, p. 21.

when a person is married to someone who destroys their marriage bond through adultery or desertion, divorce is permissible. That's the word Jesus used in Matthew 19:8. God *permits* it. He certainly doesn't require it, and He gives grace when a person chooses to work at saving the marriage, if at all possible.

You can feel for Joseph, can't you? He's been preparing for the biggest day of his life, filled with excitement. And now he learns his beloved Mary is pregnant, and he knows he's not the father. He doesn't want to humiliate her, for he cares for her. But if he marries her, he knows what everyone's going to conclude, and it's something that a righteous man wouldn't want people to conclude, namely, that he wasn't as righteous as they always thought.

That's Joseph's dilemma. And so he decided on a private divorce. It seemed the best option to a man who wanted to protect both his testimony and the woman he loved.

Did you ever wonder why God picked a betrothed virgin rather than a single virgin? If God's plan was to bring the Messiah into the world through a virgin, why not choose a *single* virgin? Why choose a betrothed virgin like Mary? After all, this was embarrassing, not just for Mary, but for Joseph too. "It would have been possible to reduce embarrassment," writes Bruner, "by involving only one person—Mary *prior to any engagement*—rather than by involving two persons."³

You say, "Well, God wanted Joseph to adopt Jesus, so Jesus would be in the royal line of David." That's true, but Joseph could have met and married Mary after the birth, and then adopted her baby.

I wonder if Joseph ever asked himself that question. After all, he's a righteous man. What will people think of him if his betrothed wife gets pregnant and he goes ahead and marries her?

Most Bible scholars conclude that Joseph died before Jesus began His public ministry. That meant that Joseph went to his grave with people still snickering. How could he ever defend his reputation, or his wife's, or his child's? If he says, "Listen, folks, it's not what you think. There's a righteous explanation to all this," who's going to believe him?

Bruner gives an interesting perspective when he writes, "From the instant that Jesus appeared on the world scene, even at his conception, he caused righteous people *to rethink what was righteous*."⁴

That brings us to scene three. First, Joseph's discovery, then his dilemma. Now...

III. We see Joseph's dream (20-21).

Let's look at verse 20, "But after he had considered this [the KJV says, "But while he thought on these things"]." The verb indicates Joseph's decision wasn't impulsive. He spent time deliberating his options, and then came the shock of his life.

"...an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream..." It's not the last time an angel provided Joseph with direction. In Matthew 2:13 an angel told him in another dream to take the child and his mother to Egypt to escape Herod. Then after Herod died, an angel told him in yet another dream to return to Israel (Matt 2:19-20).

Now back to the angel's first message in verses 20-21. "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

You'll notice the angel had basically seven things to say to Joseph.

³ Bruner, p. 21.

⁴ Bruner, p. 21.

A. The angel called him David's son. "Joseph, son of David," says the angel, highlighting Joseph's royal blood.

B. The angel told him not to fear. "Do not be afraid," he said. How many times do we hear that instruction in the Scriptures? It's what the angel told Mary in Luke 1:30, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God." It's what an angel told the women at the tomb in Matthew 28:5, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified." It's what Jesus told fearful people again and again (Matt 10:28, 31, etc), and what the Glorified Lord told John in Revelation 1:17.

You see, fear can keep us from doing what God wants us to do in our lives. Especially the fear of man. Or the fear of leaving your comfort zone and moving into unfamiliar territory. That's what Joseph was facing. *Don't be afraid*, said the angel.

C. The angel told him to take Mary as his wife. "Do not fear to take Mary as your wife," says the ESV. In other words, go ahead, Joseph. Move ahead as planned. End the betrothal period and take Mary to your home. Marry her. This, of course, meant that her son would legally be his son, and therefore, *the Son of David*.

D. The angel told him that the child was conceived by the Holy Spirit. He says the baby she carries is "*from* the Holy Spirit." The Greek word is *ek*, "out of." The word *eccentric* has this prefix, and as Bruner points out, "God's work is often, to human eyes, eccentric, off-center, odd, indeed even foolish and weak, as the cross most dramatically revealed (1 Cor 1), but as now Christmas reveals, too."⁵

Many modern scholars have trouble with the doctrine of the virgin birth, and they often attack it, saying, "It's not rational. It's not natural." The truth is, it's supernatural and must be accepted by faith, just like salvation. In fact, once you've experienced the personal miracle of salvation by faith alone in Christ alone, the miracle of the virgin birth isn't hard to believe at all.

I know I've shared with you before the story about the miner, but it's worth repeating. There was a miner who lived in the eighteenth century in England. He was a rough, sin-hardened man, but he heard the good news about Jesus Christ, and how Christ died on the cross and conquered the grave to save sinners like him. And by a work of God's grace, that man believed in Christ and became a Christian. His friends mocked him. They asked him, "Do you really believe that Jesus changed water into wine?" He simply replied, "I don't know how Jesus changed water into wine, but I know that in my house He changed beer into furniture."

My friend, Christianity is not anti-intellectual, but if you're waiting until the virgin birth makes intellectual sense to you to believe it, or the new birth, or the rest of the miracles the Bible presents, you will remain a skeptic. Not because these miracles aren't true, but because our tiny little minds can't fathom what the Infinite One does.

When I was a child, I couldn't explain electricity, but then one day after touching an electric outlet, I had no problem believing it exists. So if God could cause life to appear in my dead soul, surely He could cause a life to begin within a virgin named Mary.

Now let's look at the fifth thing Joseph heard.

E. The angel told him that Mary was going to have a son. That's verse 21, "She will give birth to a son." So Joseph didn't need an ultrasound to determine the gender of the child Mary was carrying. *It's a boy*, said the angel.

F. The angel told him to name the son Jesus. The "you" is singular. And *you*, Joseph, are to give him the name *Jesus*. Interestingly, the angel Gabriel gave Mary the same instruction in Luke 1:31, "You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus."

⁵ Bruner, p. 23.

Apparently, the Lord didn't want the couple arguing over the baby's name. He sent an angel to both Mary and Joseph with the same instruction. *Give him the name Jesus.* And, as Matthew 1:25 indicates, Joseph took the lead and did as instructed, "And he gave him the name Jesus."

What's so special about the name *Jesus*? Jesus is the English name. It comes from the Hebrew name *Yeshua*, or Joshua. *Yeshua* is a combination of two other words. The *Ye* comes from *Yahweh*, the Lord; and the *shua* comes from the verb "to deliver or save." So the name Jesus means "Yahweh saves" or "The Lord saves."

Think of the significance. Every time Joseph called the child Jesus from his wood shop, or Mary called him to come to dinner, they were preaching the gospel. 'Jesus! Yeshua! The Lord saves!'

And in case Joseph missed the point of the name, seventh...

G. The angel told him what this son was going to do. "Give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

Why did God send His Son to earth? To inspire us? To give us an example to follow? Is that what Jesus is? An inspiration and an example? He's far more than that. That's why He's called *Jesus*. Why? Because He came to *save His people*. Save them from what? From the frustrations of living in a fallen world? That's not what the angel said because that's not our greatest need. *Save them from their sins.*

Don't miss this, friends.

1. *Our biggest problem is sin.* Sins, says the angel. He's not talking about sins committed against us, either, but our sins. Not just the things that we don't like about ourselves, but the things we've done that rival and displease the One who made us and deserves our obedience and devotion. *Our sins.*

And to complicate things, as sinners we don't want to admit what our problem is. We don't want to admit that we are *sinners* and as such displeasing God. We see ourselves as good people, perhaps with a few flaws, but still good people who deserve God's blessings in this life and in heaven to come.

I mentioned the Tim Tebow controversy last week, how that even though Tebow keeps leading the Denver Broncos to win football games, his critics are relentless in pointing out his football flaws. Larry Taunton wrote a very insightful editorial in *USA Today* entitled "*The Anti-Tebow Bias Isn't about Football.*" Here's how he concludes:

Jake Plummer, the latest to take pot shots at the embattled Denver quarterback, might have been speaking for anti-Tebowites everywhere when he said in an interview on a Phoenix radio station that he would like Tebow more if he would "shut up" about his faith in Jesus Christ.

And with that little comment, the cat, as they say, was out of the bag. Plummer said what the commentators wouldn't say. Their dislike for Tim Tebow is not, as they would have us believe, about his throwing motion or his completion percentage; it's all about his open professions of faith and his goody-two shoes image. When it comes right down to it, we don't want heroes who are truly good. We want them to fail the occasional drug test or start a bar fight from time to time. It makes us feel better about ourselves. Tebow, however, doesn't make us feel better about ourselves. People like him make us feel a little convicted about the things we say and do. So we find a reason to dislike them. Or, when Tebow says that glory goes to God and the credit for a victory goes to his teammates, coaches, and family, we are suspicious. An increasingly jaded culture, we don't believe that anyone can say such things and really mean them.

So we wait. We wait for evidence that he really isn't that good. We hope to see him kick a player on the ground, drop an F-bomb on television, or Tweet pictures of

his privates. In the meantime, we always have Penn State's Jerry Sandusky to make us feel better about ourselves.⁶

Regardless of what you think about Tim Tebow the football player, Mr. Taunton's assessment of the human condition is right on. He says, "We don't want heroes who are truly good. We want them to fail." That's why we're enamored with Lindsay Lohan's drug problems, and Governor Blagojevich's legal problems, and Tiger Wood's marital problems, and it's also why the gossip prevails in the work breakroom, and in the lunchroom at school. We like to talk about *other people's problems*. Why? Because it feeds our own inflated and faulty assessment of ourselves.

Friends, listen to the angel. Jesus didn't come to earth for good people, for in God's eyes, "there is no one righteous, not even one (Rom 3:10)." He came to save His people from their sins.⁷

So to be one of *His people*, you must admit that sin isn't just *their* problem. It's *your* problem. It's *my* problem. And then admit this, too.

2. *Our only hope is to be saved.* The Bible says that I need to be saved from my sins, from the penalty of my sins, from the power of my sins, from the presence of my sins, and so do you. And that's why Jesus came. That's why He ultimately went to Jerusalem and died a terrible death on the cross, then defeated death on the third day, *to save His people from their sins*.

So what did Joseph do? We've seen Joseph's discovery, dilemma, and dream. What happened next? We'll find next time, the Lord willing, as we consider *Joseph's decision* in verses 22-25.

Make It Personal: Ask yourself these questions...

As we finish today and prepare for Communion, I invite you to ask yourself three questions.

1. *What do you think about Jesus?* Do you agree with the angel's assessment of Him? Do you believe that He indeed is both God's eternal Son and Mary's virgin born son, the God-man? And do agree with the angel's message as to why He came, to save sinners from their sins? Is that what you *think* about Jesus? If not, I urge you to do a personal study of the gospel record. Find out who Jesus really is.

2. *What are you doing with Jesus?* It's not enough just to give mental assent to the angel's message. The appropriate response to Jesus is to *believe in Him*. To say, "Yes, I believe that *Yahweh saves* and that I cannot save myself. I believe that Jesus is the God-man who came to save *me* from *my* sins, and I put my total trust in Him."

But it's not just past tense *believed*. It's present tense *believing*. Are you trusting in Jesus right now? Are you living for Him and making Him known to others? What are you *doing* with Jesus?

3. *What decision in your life would most honor King Jesus this week?* He is the King. If you say He is your King, are you living like it? Take inventory. What's the most important thing that needs to happen this week to show that He's your King? Maybe you need to get baptized. Maybe you need to make a quiet time with Him a priority in your daily schedule. Maybe you need to go make things right with a brother. Or tell a neighbor about Him. Change happens one decision at a time. So what decision would *most* honor the King this week?

⁶ <http://www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/forum/story/2011-12-02/tim-tebow-faith-media/51582844/1>

⁷ Who are "his people"? *His people* are *Messiah's people* (see D.A. Carson). Who are Messiah's people? Is the angel talking about the Jews? Yes, but not just the Jews. Gentiles too. In Luke 2:10, an angel also told the shepherds, "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for *all the people*."