

## Jesus-Immanuel: God with Us to Save Us, Matthew 1:18-25

Caleb Nelson | Harvest Reformed Presbyterian Church | December 25, 2016

“He says exactly "was found [with child]," for so we use to say of things not thought of. And that you should not molest the Evangelist by asking in what way was this birth of a virgin, he clears himself shortly, saying, "Of the Holy Ghost." As much as to say, it was the Holy Ghost that wrought this miracle. For neither Gabriel nor Matthew could say any further.” -- Chrysostom

“or when he heard out of the mouth of the Angel those very things that he thought within himself, this was an undoubted proof, that he was a messenger from God, who alone knows the secrets of the heart.” --Ibid.

“For as the Lord permitted the apostle Thomas to doubt his resurrection, so that he might touch, and touching, believe, and by believing he might remove the wound of unbelief in us; in the same way the Lord permitted Joseph to doubt the chastity of Mary so that, doubting, he might receive the angelic revelation, and by receiving it believe it more firmly.” — Thomas Aquinas, *in loc.*

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**Proposition:** Jesus of Nazareth was conceived in Mary through the Holy Spirit’s work, thus fulfilling prophecy, descending from David, becoming a fit Savior from sin, and being Immanuel. That’s what the narrator says, and that’s what the people involved believed to be the case.

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, today is celebrated not only by the church, but by multitudes of non-Christians, as the holiday called Christmas. Indeed, one of the best Christmas lights displays I’ve ever seen was in Sendai, Japan, and the Japanese (though less than 1 percent of them are actually Christian believers) say that they are Christians at Christmas. All of this celebration has grown up over the centuries around the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, a man who grew up in Nazareth but who was born in Bethlehem. But our text this morning, though it is a Christmas text, does not even mention the birth of Jesus Christ. Oh, many English translations begin v. 18 with “the birth of Jesus Christ,” but the actual Greek word there is “Genesis,” literally “beginning.” Do you want to know the genesis of Jesus? Then read on, says Matthew. Here is His genesis. Here is how he began. What I hope to show you is that Jesus of Nazareth was conceived in Mary through the Holy Spirit’s work, thus fulfilling prophecy, descending from David, becoming a fit Savior from sin, and being Immanuel.

**I. The Narrator’s Account: Mary Conceived a Child by the Holy Spirit, v. 18**

We being reading v. 18, and we immediately see that Mary is an engaged girl, and that she is engaged to Joseph. Who is Joseph? Well, Matthew has just spent the first 17 verses of this chapter explaining who Joseph is. Joseph is the rightful heir to the throne of King David, now living in obscurity in a remote corner of the Roman Empire. This is the kind of stuff of which novels and films are made, right? We have a true heir of the rightful king, only he’s not king, and shows no sign of becoming king. But the blood of royalty is in him, and great things will happen in the rest of the story. That’s how we’re supposed to read this notice.

But you can see as well that Joseph isn’t the main event here. The Son is the one who makes the father famous, not vice-versa. The story isn’t going to be about Joseph, but about Jesus Christ. The narrator tells us that Jesus had a mother, and that his mother was engaged to Joseph. Then, during the engagement, she was found to be pregnant.

How did this happen? Not through the ordinary way. In fact, the purity and chastity with which the Bible recounts the story are amazing. There is absolutely nothing here to stir the prurient interest of even the most lust-filled person. Before Mary and Joseph had anything to do with each other in a way that might get Mary pregnant, Mary got pregnant. The agent of this pregnancy was not a man, though, or a pagan god. The agent of this pregnancy was the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit did not father a child with Mary; no, He formed a child within her.

So we have here the narrator's insistence that Jesus is the natural son of Mary, but not the natural son of Joseph. He's the adopted son of Joseph, as we'll see by the end of this section. We have here the further insistence that this pregnancy was a direct divine act, not brought about through ordinary means.

So the narrator has directly asserted the most important thing about the genesis of Jesus Christ. He's not Joseph's son. He is Mary's son, but through the completely supernatural work of the Holy Spirit.

## **II. The Narrator's Account Reinforced: Joseph Wants a Divorce, v. 19**

Now the narrator gives us another piece of information: Joseph wants a divorce. In other words, this is supposed to confirm in our minds the thought that Joseph knew Mary was pregnant, and he knew it wasn't his baby. Joseph was a righteous man, and he would never have gotten a girl pregnant, promised her marriage, and then divorced her.

Notice also that Joseph's righteousness is given as the reason he sought a no-fault divorce. In that day, engagement was just as binding as marriage. The only way out of engagement was a divorce. Two kinds of divorces were available in 1st-century Israel. The first kind was one where you took your wife to court and sued her for infidelity. If you won, then you could get a divorce and keep the bride-price you had endowed her with. If you lost, you had to stay married. The second kind of divorce was a no-fault divorce, as we would call it today. You didn't have to prove anything, or even go to court. You simply had to write out a divorce certificate and hand it to your wife with the proper procedure. That terminated the marriage — but she got to keep whatever bride-price she had originally gotten as part of the marriage deal. If you wanted your money back, then, you had to seek the first kind of divorce. If you just wanted the divorce and didn't care about the financial hit, you would not drag the poor woman into court and have her convicted of adultery. You'd just divorce her and let her keep the money.

Now, those who don't believe divorce is Biblical usually ignore this text, or say that Joseph and Mary weren't actually married yet. But again, the text says directly that Joseph wanted a divorce, and that he chose to use the no-fault option *because he was a righteous man*. Because he was devoted to keeping God's law, he wanted to let Mary go without letting the whole world know that she was an adulteress.

In that day, if you stayed with an adulterous spouse, you were generally looked upon as an accomplice. You were an enabler, helping your spouse sin against the marriage. A just person would divorce an adulterous spouse. And that is what Joseph prepares to do here.

## **III. The Angel's Account, vv. 20-21**

While Joseph was thinking about this (which reminds us that we too should think hard before we make decisions about marriage and divorce, or really about anything important), an angel comes and repeats the narrator's account.

**A. Mary Is Innocent, v. 20**

The angel tells him that he doesn't need a divorce because Mary is innocent. Her child is from God the Holy Spirit, not from fornication. Again, we might say, "How?" The Bible doesn't say how. It simply says that this happened. The Son of God, as Luke tells us, was born from a human mother.

**B. Mary's Pregnancy Is from the Holy Spirit, v. 20**

The Holy Spirit is not the Father of Jesus; He is simply the one who knit Him together inside Mary. Matthew is cluing us in to the fact that the Holy Spirit's era is dawning, that the New Covenant time when God pours out His Spirit is almost here. The Spirit is at work in the world, bringing to birth none other than the Son of God!

**C. Mary's Child Is No Ordinary Child, v. 21**

Well, if His divine origin isn't enough, the angel goes on to tell Joseph two salient facts about this Messiah.

**1. He Is Named "Jesus" by God Himself, v. 21b**

First of all, His name has been given by God. Now, Isaac had a name given by God, and John the Baptist had a name given by God — but really, it's not so common, even in the Bible. The fact that this child is named by God is huge. It means that He is special to God, that He has a particularly important role in God's great plan of redemption.

**2. He Will Save His People from Their Sins, v. 21c**

The name's meaning tells us what that role is: He will save His people from their sins! That's the sum of what salvation through Jesus is about. It's about deliverance from sin.

It's not about saving us from bad feelings, or from bad credit. It's not directly about saving us from pain, or hurt, or hunger, or sickness. The thing Jesus came to save us from was sin!

Sin, as you know, is anything that violates God's law. It's any lack of obeying God's law. Jesus came to save us from that. But notice that the angel doesn't conceive of sin as some outside force. He says, "*Their* sins." If you think you're perfect, then Jesus isn't for you. He came to seek and save *the lost*. He came to save His people from their sins. That means that He came to endure the punishment their sins deserved so that their sins could be forgiven. He came to remove their sins from them, to separate them from their sins so that they would not suffer the penalty of that sin. He came to make it possible for them to stop sinning. Brothers and sisters, if in your heart of hearts you want to keep sinning, then Jesus' salvation has not come to you. He saves from sins. If you think sin is part of this nutritious breakfast, part of this pleasant suburban lifestyle, part of the way we live in the 21st century, then you haven't grasped why Jesus came. Jesus came because sin is horrifically awful, and God was willing to give even His own Son to

stop it. If you want to claim loyalty to this Jesus, then you must at the very least want to be saved from sin.

Notice also that Jesus did not come to merely make salvation possible. Many Bible teachers say that ultimately, based on various philosophical considerations, the most we can say is that Jesus made salvation possible. What before could not happen now can happen, provided we human beings do our end of the deal. But that's not what the angel told Joseph. The angel said that Jesus would save unilaterally. He came to save — to make it happen, not just to make it available.

This is why we celebrate Christmas. We aren't celebrating a maybe, a possibility. We are celebrating something that actually happened: the conception and birth of Jesus the Savior.

#### **IV. The Narrator Presents These Events as Fulfilled Prophecy, vv. 22-23**

Matthew wants us to know that Jesus' birth was fully in accordance with God's word. So he quotes from Isaiah 7. This prophecy was given to King Ahaz and through him to the whole house of David. Matthew sees that, and he's just carefully established that Joseph was from the house of David. So as he sees it, this prediction was fulfilled in Jesus, a member of the house of David. God said this would happen, and it happened.

##### **A. The Nature of the Prediction, v. 22**

Matthew underlines for us two things about this prediction.

###### **1. It Was from the Lord, v. 22a**

The first is that it's not something Isaiah came up with that sounded cool. This was said by God Himself, and God's word is reliable. In fact, it is more than rock-solid, because rocks are solid only because God's word keeps them that way. God promised 700 years previously that a virgin would conceive and bear a son.

###### **2. It Was Through a Prophet, v. 22b**

But God promised this through a human spokesman — a prophet. In the same way, Matthew will show us in the rest of this gospel how Jesus was God's human agent on earth. God speaks, and we hear the words from a man. Isn't that exactly what went on during Jesus' lifetime? Actually, that's still going on today. When you come to church and hear me preaching, insofar as I'm saying what's here on the page, then you are hearing God Himself speak to you. You are hearing what's spoken by God through His prophet, through His preacher.

Scary? It should be, for you and for me. We have a lot to live up to. We are hearing from God Himself here, and we'd better pay attention!

##### **B. The Content of the Prediction, v. 23**

Well, what exactly did God say would happen?

###### **1. A Virgin Would Become Pregnant, v. 23a**

It was prophesied a long time ago that a virgin would conceive. This word in Greek definitely means "virgin," as in a young woman who has never had sexual contact with anyone. The Hebrew original may mean only "young woman," but as Martin Luther pointed out, it is never used of a married woman. It too seems to contain the idea of virginity. Isaiah said this 700 years

previously as a sign to faithless Ahaz. You don't want a sign, Ahaz? You don't want God's assurance that He will save His people? Then here's a sign: a virgin conception.

Why did Jesus need to be born from a virgin? Presumably, so that He would not be tainted with Adam's sin, and so it would be clear that though He was fully man, he was no ordinary man. Adam was the only other man who had no human father — and like Adam, Jesus is to be the head of a new humanity. Jesus was supernaturally conceived in a virgin's womb by the power of the Holy Spirit. Do you doubt it? Then consider this anecdote. 'An unbeliever once asked a Christian this question: "If I should tell you that a child had been born in this city without a father, would you believe it?" The Christian answered, "Yes, if he should live as Jesus lived."' -- William Hendriksen, *in loc.*

### **2. Her Pregnancy Would Result in the Birth of a Son, v. 23b**

But not only would the Virgin conceive; her child would come to term, and be safely born, and he would be a son. I guarantee that no one in this room can tell the gender of a child that will be born next year. So to know at a distance of 700 years not only that there would be a virgin conception, but that its product would be a Son, is indeed miraculous, not to say prophetic.

### **3. That Son Would Be Named "God With Us," v. 23c**

But further, Isaiah said that this son's name would be Immanuel, which is the Hebrew for God with Us. What does this mean? That Jesus would be the fulfillment of the Temple, that He would be better than Eden! Remember how Solomon's Temple was God's residence? The glory of the Temple was that God lived in Jerusalem, right among His people. Jesus' birth is even better: God is living among us, and He is one of us! Rather than being shut up in a temple, hiding behind curtains in an area inaccessible to the ordinary worshipper, our God is now a man, with us, among us. Matthew Henry's comment is too good to leave out:

Nor is it improper to say that the prophecy which foretold that he should be called *Immanuel* was fulfilled, in the design and intention of it, when he was called *Jesus*; for if he had not been *Immanuel* — *God with us*, he could not have been *Jesus* — *a Saviour*; and herein consists the salvation he wrought out, in the *bringing of God and man together*; this was what he designed, to bring *God* to be *with us*, which is our great happiness, and to bring *us* to *be with God*, which is our great duty. (*In loc.*)

Jesus saved us by bringing us to God, as Peter put (1 Pet. 3:18). But He also was God coming to us.

### **4. Implication: That Son Would Be God in the Flesh**

Does it make sense, then, to say the Jesus was not really God? Not at all. He was truly God, come in the flesh to save His people. That's why His name would be called God with us. Such a name wouldn't make much sense if He weren't really God, right?

In any case, as we see in the next chapter, when the wise men came they immediately fell down and worshipped Him. Why? Because He was God, the only one whom we can lawfully worship.

So all this was foretold seven hundred years before, because it wasn't Isaiah making wild guesses; it was God saying what He was going to do.

Do you rejoice in this birth? Do you want to know God, to be with Him? He's not just God above us, as the light of nature shows; He's not just God against us, as our conscience tells us. He is God with us, as this verse tells us. O, fellow Christians, rejoice in the fulfillment of this prophecy! It is almost too good to be true: God is willing to live with us. God is here, and He will fix everything. He'll start by removing sin.

#### **V. The Narrator's Account Reinforced: Joseph Believed It Was True, vv. 24-25**

Well, in case you find all this hard to believe, the narrator informs us that Joseph, who was there and saw the whole thing, believed it.

##### **A. Joseph Chooses to Complete His Marriage to Mary, v. 24**

First of all, Joseph chose to go through with his marriage. He decided that Mary was not an adulteress, and that the angel's testimony was credible.

Joseph believed that God was at work. Joseph believed that his fiancée hadn't cheated on him. Matthew is not-so-subtly telling us to believe it too. We need to understand that Mary was perfectly innocent, and that Joseph had no reason to divorce her.

##### **B. Joseph Is Clearly Not the Biological Father of Jesus, v. 25a**

Second, we need to see that Joseph had absolutely no sexual contact of any kind with Mary until after Jesus was born. Say what you will, Jesus was not his biological son. Some other power was at work, doing the man's part in this conception.

##### **C. Joseph Is the Adoptive Father of Jesus, v. 25b**

But notice — even though Joseph didn't father Jesus, he does name Him. In the Roman world, for a man to take the baby and name it was to publicly acknowledge it as his. Joseph is saying, "This is my son. I claim him." So even though the narrative is clear that Jesus wasn't a biological son, he is an adoptive son. This is how He traces His lineage to David. Joseph is the rightful heir to David's throne, and he has adopted his wife's baby as his own — thus making Him David's rightful heir.

Do you see how glorious that is? We are adoptive sons of God. Jesus Himself was an adoptive Son of David. God was His real Father, but Joseph was His adoptive father. He was the Son of God and the Son of Man — not the son of a man, but one who was nonetheless a perfect man. He was adopted into the human family so that He might adopt us into His divine family, making God our Father even as God was His Father.

Brothers and sisters, that is the genesis of Jesus Christ. It was through the Spirit. It was through Mary. It was predicted long ago, and explained by an angel. Joseph believed it implicitly. Do you believe it? When you celebrate Christmas, do you celebrate not just lights and trees and reindeer, but the Incarnation of the Son of God? Do you rejoice that the genesis of

Jesus was not from man or through man, but from the Holy Spirit's power? Do you give thanks to God that Jesus saves because and as He is God with us? I hope so. Indeed, I invite you to give thanks with me now as we celebrate the holy sacrament. Amen.