

Joseph, Who Adopted God
Matthew 1:18-25
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Read Matthew 1:18-25

"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever." (Isaiah 40:8)

Introduction

Looking forward to the birth of your first child is always an amazing experience. It's been a long time for us, but through the years I've enjoyed watching as other couples anticipate becoming parents for the first time. The moms usually have a mixture of excitement and a healthy dose of fear about just how much childbirth is going to hurt and all the changes and mood swings, so there are books like *What To Expect When You're Expecting* and *No Drama First-Time Mama*. But if you haven't seen the bookstore shelves (or should I say Amazon titles) on childbirth recently, there are actually quite a few geared towards fathers now: *Pickles and Ice Cream: A Father's Guide To Pregnancy, Mission: Baby – Dad's Survival Guide to Baby's First Year, Caveman's Guide To Baby's First Year: Early Fatherhood for the Modern Hunter-Gatherer, Crouching Father, Hidden Toddler: A Zen Guide For New Dads*, and my personal favorite, *What To Expect When Your Wife Is Expanding*.

I remember reading one of those books during Kath's first pregnancy, and it quoted Michael J. Fox, the actor, on the cover - he said it was refreshing to have a book that acknowledged that the dad actually had something to do with the whole thing. Today we're going to focus on a man who quite literally had nothing to do with the conception of his Child's birth, but had a lot to do with the circumstances surrounding His birth and early life. Luke's narrative of Jesus' birth is focused on Mary, while Matthew's is focused on Joseph. This is a man whom we don't hear anything about after Jesus is 12 years old. We don't actually get a single word of dialogue from him in the Bible, just a third-person narrative of his actions. But his obedience to God was vital for his family's well-being and his Son's ability to fulfill the plan that He was sent to earth to accomplish.

The first two verses tell us about when Joseph found out about Mary's pregnancy:

I. Joseph's Intentions (vv. 18-19)

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.

Someone who is coming to this text for the first time might be confused by the wording: verse 19 calls Joseph "her husband," but then in verse 20 the angel tells him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife. Which is it - are they married or not? We have to understand the three stages for a Jewish couple in that day to be married:¹

1) **Engagement** had nothing to do with a young man getting down on one knee and holding out a ring. This was two families arranging marriage between their children, often when they were very young. Remember that Mary would have been around 13 years old when these events happened.

2) **Betrothal** was a year-long period of time- they lived apart and had no sexual relations, but it was a legally binding agreement pledged in front of witnesses. A divorce was required to call

¹ Robert H. Mounce, *Matthew: A Good News Commentary* (Philadelphia: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 4.

off the wedding. This solves the confusion - they could be called husband and wife, but they were not yet fully joined in marriage.

3) The **Wedding** and Marriage itself – after the one-year betrothal, the couple was married and the wife moved into her husband’s home, united in every way.

So, here were Joseph and Mary in the betrothal period - “sort of” married, but not physically intimate, when Mary became pregnant. And when the community around them found that out, they most likely recoiled in shock and started gossiping. But Joseph knew his side of the truth - he was a “just man” and had not violated social custom and Biblical law by sleeping with Mary. And Mary knew the full truth – she had not been with any man.

It’s important to understand some of the Old Testament laws here. Deuteronomy 22:23-24 said that if a man had sexual relations with another man’s betrothed, they could both be stoned. That did not often happen in Israel at the time, but Mary also could have been disgraced and expelled from the community. Deuteronomy 24:1 called upon a man to divorce his wife if he “finds something indecent about her.” Joseph realized this was his duty, yet he was going to do it compassionately and honorably; he didn’t want to humiliate her or shame her further so he would do things quietly and privately.

But Joseph needed to break things off. He was a righteous man who wanted a righteous wife - if she had already been unfaithful before they finalized the marriage, what kind of wife would she be? He did not plan to adopt this child, and he needed to have his noble name kept away from this whole scandal. But before he could break things off with her and initiate divorce, the Lord had something else in store, so the next four verses show

II. God’s Intervention (vv. 20-23)

²⁰ But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ²³ “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us).

Joseph fell asleep one night and received direct orders from an angel of the Lord that he must go through with this marriage and therefore accept the child as his own. The angel told him who the real father of the child was: God Himself. The Holy Spirit had placed this child inside Mary. Then the angel said that it was going to be a boy and that they would need to name Him Jesus, which means “Yahweh saves” because that would be His role: saving His people from their sins.

The virgin birth embarrasses some modern Christians because it sounds so anti-scientific. They’ll say that surely the Gospel writers were stretching the truth a bit, and Jesus was actually Joseph’s or another man’s; no one only gets born from one parent, we’re too smart for that. But if we believe that, we’ve completely lost the deity of Jesus, and then we’ve lost the whole Gospel, because He would no longer be able to save us from our sins. If Jesus was just created by the procreation of Mary and a man (whether Joseph or someone else), then He inherited the sin of Adam and was not born sinless. He could not be the sinless sacrifice that kept the law perfectly on our behalf. If He had come without any human parents, He could not identify with us and stand in as our substitute. If He had come with two human parents, then He could not have been fully God. We must cling to the truth of the gospel writer’s historical records because Jesus was the perfect God-Man, having His divine nature from the Holy Spirit and His human nature from Mary.

I was listening to a football podcast this week and they mentioned that today (Dec. 23rd) is the 50th anniversary of the Immaculate Conception. And I thought, Uh no, it's the 50th anniversary of the Immaculate **Reception**, that great football play where the Steelers won their first playoff game in franchise history when Franco Harris made an amazing catch off a pass that had deflected off the Raider's safety and ran it in for a touchdown. (Not that I'm a huge fan or anything...) Growing up I knew that the Immaculate Reception was a play on the wording of Immaculate Conception, but I was still confused. As a good Protestant, I thought that the Immaculate Conception just meant that Jesus was born without sin. I found out later that the Catholic church taught that the Immaculate Conception meant that Mary was sinless. That is both unbiblical and unnecessary for Jesus' ability to save us. Mary was a regular human being who was sinful and inherited Adam's corrupt nature like the rest of us; Jesus' birth from the Holy Spirit meant that He did not inherit Adam's corruption.

Verses 22-23 note the fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14, which said that a virgin shall conceive and you shall call His name Immanuel. Not Jesus, which is what the angel instructed, but Immanuel, God with us. The fact that they called Him Jesus doesn't wreck the fulfillment of the prophecy, it's adding the fact that Yahweh saves because He has come to be with us. Jesus came in the flesh, He became one of us, to identify with us and face everything that we did. He came among us to love us and prepare the way to take His people to heaven with Him.

The last two verses show us

III. Joseph's Obedience (vv. 24-25)

²⁴ When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife,

²⁵ but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

As far as we can tell, Joseph responds with immediate obedience after this angel dream. This is noteworthy because the Bible has several stories of people who responded poorly to God's angels or God Himself:

- Sarah, Abraham's wife, laughed in disbelief when she was told she would be having a son at the age of ninety.
- Gideon had an angel of the Lord appear and tell him to save Israel from Midian's hand, but he doubted greatly and demanded multiple signs.
- Jonah resisted the word of the Lord to preach to the people of Nineveh by jumping on a boat going the opposite direction.
- Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, doubted the angel's word that his wife Elizabeth would be pregnant at an old age with John, and had been stricken mute for it.

Joseph's obedience is important, because think about what he's being asked to do: enter into Mary's scandal and shame. The doubts are transferred from her to him. If he left her, in the community's eyes she would be known as the adulterous one, and he would be the smart one who walked away from a mess. But if he stayed, everyone would think that he must have gotten her pregnant. But God had called him to this - not just for Mary's sake, but for Jesus' sake.

Jesus is the *scandalon* - an offense that trips people up. If we are to follow Jesus, we, like Joseph, will have to bear some of that shame and scandal. Not only was Jesus born under questionable circumstances, and not only did He die a criminal's death, but He confronts our world with the things that it doesn't want to hear about: sin, hell, depravity, and holiness. We will not be academically respectable if we tell people that we believe in a virgin birth and the fact that a peasant's death could make us right with God. Are we willing to risk our reputations to follow God? Are we willing to enter into the scandal of who Jesus is and what following Him looks like?

The other question is: Are you willing to submit to God? As Christians, we're happy to have Jesus as our Savior, keeping us out of hell and giving us purpose, forgiving our sins, all that. But are we really open to having God totally wreck our lives? At some point, God will call you out of your own plans, like He did to Joseph, and call you to something that He needs done - how will you respond? I'm not saying that you'll have an angel visit you in a dream, but you'll face times in your life when you know it's going to take some courage and you might have to face some ridicule and you'll have to lay down your own plans to be obedient to the Lord. There might be pressure on you from friends and family like there probably was on Joseph. Will you choose the approval of man or the will of God?

Ultimately, your being obedient to the Lord and taking on some shame and ridicule for Jesus' sake is nothing compared to what He's done for you. Jesus was obedient to God's plan and God's law in every moment of His life. And when He died for us, He chose to take on the shame and the penalty for rotten sinners like you and me. Our sin was poured out on Him while He hung on the cross. Salvation and eternal life are available for those who have faith and believe in Him.

Conclusion

I understand the people who want to stop saying "Merry Christmas" and just say "Happy holidays." I don't agree with them, but I understand that when we really separate out the cultural trappings of Santa and Rudolph, wrapping presents, drinking eggnog, putting up a tree, all that external stuff - when we get to the heart of Christmas we find a crazy story. It's the greatest Good News, but it's hard to believe. The divine became human. The infinite, all-powerful, all-knowing, Son of God took upon Himself a human nature: finite, limited in power, limited in knowledge, limited in time and space.² We're so used to hearing that the Word became flesh and that God became a man that it doesn't amaze us anymore. But it should. God the Son, Jesus, became a fetus with human DNA, then an infant with a human body, then an adolescent with acne and growing pains, then a man with every emotion, temptation, and experience that we have in order to save us. And through it all He remained thoroughly divine, even while being thoroughly human. The two natures inseparably joined together in one person without conversion or composition or confusion, as our catechism tells us. It's a mystery and it's the deepest truth of Christmas. One of the songs that we sing, "Come Behold The Wondrous Mystery," that isn't really a Christmas song has these words:

"Come behold the wondrous mystery in the dawning of the King / He the theme of heaven's praises robed in frail humanity / In our longing, in our darkness, now the light of life has come / Look to Christ who condescended, took on flesh to ransom us."

May we never lose the wonder of what Christmas means and worship the true Gift, Amen.

² From the article "Christmas Mysteries" by Dr. James Anderson in the *RTS Quarterly* magazine, Winter 2009, p. 4.