



Immanuel Is Born

December 20, 2009

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:

MATTHEW 1:18–25

PRINTED TEXT:

MATTHEW 1:18–25

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.

—Matthew 1:21

Opening Song

Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; the third day He arose from the dead, He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Church Universal, the communion of the saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting

Opening Prayer

MATTHEW 1:18-25 (NIV)

1¹⁸This 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.¹⁹Because 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.²⁰But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "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.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 took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:²³"The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"^[b]—which means, "God with us."²⁴When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.²⁵But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

INTRODUCTION**A. HONOR VS. SHAME**

Thomas Jefferson penned these words to end the United States Declaration of Independence: “We mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.” It is easy to understand what he meant by *lives* and *fortunes*, but what did he intend by *sacred honor*?

Honor may be defined as “moral reputation.” To act honorably is to act in accordance with the recognized moral standards of one’s community. To be dishonorable is to be accused of a grave violation of public morality and to be judged guilty as such in the eyes of the community. Because morality must have a religious foundation, *true honor* is always *sacred honor*.

In our increasingly amoral and immoral society, we have lost much of this traditional sense of honor. Public figures act openly in adulterous and other immoral ways. In some communities, unwed pregnancies are the norm rather than the exception. Titans of the business world who are exposed for epic financial transgressions are quickly “rehabilitated” and allowed free rein in another company. Sports cheaters seem always able to find another team if their skills are at a high level.

How different from the days of my youth! As I grew up, there were no more devastating words said by my mother than “Shame on you!” I must admit that I heard this more than once. Many of us can still feel the heartbreak of having experienced the disapproval of a parent in this regard. When used judiciously, shame is an effective childhood motivation that continues to influence us, even as adults.

In the ancient world, shame and honor were powerful motivations and controlling influences on society. A person who acted dishonorably was seen as shameful in the public eye. This shame extended to the person’s entire family and could be influential for many generations. Business dealings with a shamed person were to be avoided. Social interaction with a shamed family was unwanted. Marriage, which was as much a joining of families as of individuals, was unlikely if one of the families was seen as dishonorable. These issues weighed heavily on Joseph in our lesson today, for he sought to act honorably in a difficult situation.

B. LESSON BACKGROUND

The birth of Jesus is recorded in two of the Gospels: Matthew and Luke. Luke, which we looked at last week, tells the story primarily from the perspective of Mary, the mother of Jesus. This week we look at Matthew’s account, which focuses on Joseph, the earthly (step)father of Jesus.

We can learn quite a bit about Joseph from the Bible. Matthew says that his father was named Jacob (Matthew 1:16). This is a nice parallel to the Jacob and Joseph of the Old Testament (see Genesis 35:22–24). Luke, however, lists the father of Joseph as Heli (Luke 3:23). Since we know that Matthew and Luke were both very careful authors, this is not a matter of one being wrong and one being right. We may not know the certain solution to this problem, but it is often understood as a reflection of the levirate marriage laws of the Jews (Genesis 38:8; Deuteronomy 25:5–10).

Under this theory, Jacob and Heli were brothers, but Jacob died early. In that situation, it was the custom for the brother to take the widow as his own wife, and Heli may have done this with Joseph’s mother. Thus both Jacob and Heli were Joseph’s fathers—one in a legal sense and one in a biological sense. Joseph himself became Jesus’ father in a legal but not biological sense.

Joseph had connections in both Bethlehem, a village outside of Jerusalem, and in Nazareth, a village in Galilee about 70 miles north of Jerusalem. Luke presents Joseph and Mary traveling

from Nazareth to Bethlehem then back again. Matthew's account adds the interlude in Egypt that resulted from the threat of murderous King Herod. We can see from all this that while Joseph was not a world traveler, he did his share of moving around! This means that his perspective was not that of a single tiny village such as Nazareth.

Joseph was a carpenter by trade (Matthew 13:55). The ancient role of a carpenter was often more than a simple woodworker in a small shop, as Joseph is usually portrayed by artists. Joseph may have been a skilled construction worker who traveled to various work sites to ply his trade. If true, it is likely that the sons in his house (including Jesus) accompanied him when they were old enough.

A current theory is that Joseph and his sons may have worked in Sepphoris. This was a large city, about an hour's walk from Nazareth, that was being rebuilt at this time. There would have been plenty of work for craftsmen in this city. The nature of the sacrifice Joseph and Mary offered when Jesus was eight days old indicates a family that was far from rich (Luke 2:24; compare Leviticus 12:8). But steady work in Sepphoris may have meant that the family of Joseph later came to be relatively well off for Galilean villagers.

While Joseph plays an important role in the birth stories of Jesus, he, unlike Mary, is absent in the stories of Jesus' ministry. This has led some to conclude that Joseph was dead by that time. This is, of course, an argument from silence. But the argument seems fairly strong since Mary, Jesus' other parent, *is* mentioned in those stories. Joseph probably was 25 to 30 years old when he married. Since Jesus was about 30 when he began his preaching (Luke 3:23), Joseph likely would have been age 55 or 60 by that time. Thus the assumption that Joseph already had passed away when Jesus began his public ministry is very plausible. How long Jesus may have been without his father, we don't know. But the fact that Jesus was still identified as "the carpenter's son" in Matthew 13:55 perhaps indicates that Joseph's death was not too distant from that point in time.

I. JOSEPH PROTECTS HIS HONOR (MATTHEW 1:18, 19)

A. HEARTBREAK EXPERIENCED (v. 18)

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.

We may find it difficult to understand the full impact of the statement that *Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph*. Our marriage customs today usually include a period of engagement followed by a marriage ceremony. To be engaged means that a man and woman are planning to marry. While being engaged is not a casual thing, it is understood that engagements can be broken (and frequently are).

This is not the situation for Joseph and Mary. According to the arranged marriage customs of the day, they are considered to be married legally when the pledge to be married takes place. This marriage is legally binding, even though the two have not yet begun to live together as husband and wife.

It is during this period that Joseph learns of Mary's pregnancy. For a woman in this position to be found pregnant means more than unfaithfulness to her fiancé. It means she has violated her marriage covenant; she (apparently) has committed adultery.

Matthew reassures us that this pregnancy is not the product of immorality, but of the *Holy Spirit*. But how do you prove such a claim? Mary's situation gives every indication of illicit sexual contact. This is far from what Joseph expected when the marriage was arranged. His honor is

threatened. He is not likely to continue a marriage with an adulteress. Joseph is not likely to agree to take a wife from a father whose house is shamed by his daughter's (apparent) sexual sin.

B. DIVORCE CONTEMPLATED (v. 19)

19. 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.

The Law of Moses requires the execution of one who commits adultery (Leviticus 20:10). To do so definitely would bring *public disgrace*, a strong deterrent for anyone tempted to have sex outside of marriage. By this time in history, however, this remedy is rarely exercised, if ever. The fact of Roman occupation may remove this possibility completely. But any kind of public remedy would still be highly shaming.

Matthew portrays Joseph as a man of honor. He is both *righteous* and merciful. His righteous nature makes it impossible to continue with the marriage. His merciful nature causes him to be kind to Mary despite her seeming betrayal.

To *divorce her* means literally to “release” Mary from the marriage contract (compare Matthew 5:31). If he takes this action, Joseph will protect his honor, but shame will fall on Mary and her family, for such actions cannot be kept secret in a small village. Even so, Joseph is determined to do this *quietly*. Even though the secret eventually will get out, Joseph will not be a party in making the issue public. There will be no street-corner proclamation of the divorce, as is sometimes done (compare John 8:3–5). This to be privately negotiated between Mary's father and Joseph.

II. JOSEPH RECEIVES A DREAM (MATTHEW 1:20–23)

A. SITUATION EXPLAINED (v. 20)

20. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “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.

God intervenes before *Joseph* can act on his plan for divorcing *Mary*. Despite his expectation of shame, *Joseph* is told not to *be afraid to take Mary home as his wife*. What has happened with *Mary* is not a sinful mistake. *Joseph* is to be part of a mighty act of God. *Joseph* will be an intimate witness to the powerful work of the Holy Spirit. The angel communicates God's approval for *Joseph* to receive *Mary* into his home. To obey God transcends any human issue of honor.

It is significant that this unnamed angel refers to *Joseph* as *son of David*. Just as *Matthew* will show that the pregnant virgin is a fulfillment of prophecy, so too is the ancestry of *Joseph*. The public assumption will be that the child is a natural son of *Joseph*; the reality will be that *Joseph* will be the legal (not biological) father. Even so, the arrival of *Jesus* will be a fulfillment of the promise to *David* of a descendant who will be the legitimate one to reign on *David's* throne (Isaiah 9:6, 7).

B. TASK ASSIGNED (v. 21)

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.”

Joseph is given another assignment: that of naming the boy. To do so is to recognize the child as his son (see Matthew 13:55). God knows that *Jesus* will need a good father and mother to prepare him for the work that lies ahead. The choosing of *Joseph* and *Mary* for these roles speaks of God's view of their characters.

As we noted in Lesson 2, the name *Jesus* is equivalent to the Old Testament name *Joshua*. This is significant. *Joshua* was the Old Testament hero who led the nation of

Israel into the promised land; Jesus will be God's servant to lead people to salvation (compare Romans 5:21; Hebrews 2:10). Names in the ancient world have meaning. Jesus/Joshua means "God is salvation" or "God is Savior." This meaning alludes to the angel's promise that *he will save his people from their sins*.

C. PROMISE KEPT (vv. 22, 23)

22. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:

One of the primary purposes behind Matthew's writing of his Gospel is to show Jesus as the one who fulfills the many Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah (see Matthew 5:17). Matthew often does this by relating something from the life of Jesus and then quoting Scripture. Matthew 1:22, 23 is the first instance of this; it is perhaps the most important, for here Matthew employs a marvelous text from the great prophet Isaiah.

23.... "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"—which means, "God with us."

It is not the birth of Jesus per se that is unusual. We can assume that he is born physically in the normal human manner. That includes labor pains, an umbilical cord, and all the rest. It is, rather, his conception that makes his arrival unique. In strictly human terms, a pregnant *virgin* is a contradiction in terms, an oxymoron. It is also a matter of faith and a cause for great wonder. God could have chosen a more spectacular sign to signal the birth of the Messiah, but it is hard to imagine a more marvelous one. Matthew's explanation of the purpose of the virgin birth is very simple: it fulfills prophecy. It is the "sign" that Isaiah anticipated (Isaiah 7:14; see last week's lesson). It is a confirmation of God's hand in the creation of this child.

There are several miraculous births recorded in the Bible (see Genesis 17:15–19;

Judges 13:2, 3; 1 Samuel 1:19, 20). In none of those cases, however, was the mother a virgin. For Mary and Joseph, there can be no doubt concerning the work of God in the conception of their *son*. It is truly an instance where they can detect that God is with the two parents. By extension, it is a sign that God is with his people. He has not forgotten them.

III. JOSEPH NAMES HIS SON (MATTHEW 1:24, 25)

A. HUSBAND'S ACTION (v. 24)

24. When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.

Matthew pictures Joseph as acting decisively. He takes Mary to be *his wife* and live in his house, being willing to bear all the implications. If there is to be shame, however unjustified, Joseph's shoulders are broad enough to bear that burden. By becoming Joseph's wife, Mary's protection and reputation have been transferred from her father to Joseph, her husband. We should neither undervalue Joseph's courage in this act nor underestimate how much this obedience has the potential of costing him.

B. FATHER'S ACTION (v. 25)

25. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

The phrase *had no union with her* means that Joseph abstains from having sexual relations with Mary. There is no record of direction from the angel to avoid this during the pregnancy, but that is what Joseph does. He has taken to heart the holiness of what is happening.

There is no indication, however, that Mary and Joseph do not have such relations after the birth, despite the doctrine that some churches maintain of Mary's perpetual virginity. To the contrary, the Gospels record that Jesus eventually has four brothers and more than one sister (see Mark

6:3; the language of Matthew 13:56 indicates that there are three or more sisters).

Matthew does not include Luke's details about shepherds and angels at the birth of Jesus, nor does he discuss the idea of a stable serving as a delivery room. Rather,

Matthew's emphasis at this point is on the prophetic and doctrinal importance of Joseph's actions. The Messiah is now among the people. God is dwelling among them in the person of Jesus (see John 1:14). Isaiah's ancient prophecy has been fulfilled.

CONCLUSION

Honor as a controlling code still exists in some places today. One of those is the military, where soldiers are still given *honorable* or *dishonorable* discharges. A foundation for a sense of honor is to realize that irresponsible and immoral actions reflect on more than just the individual who commits them. Soldiers do not (or should not) want to bring dishonor on their unit, their branch of the service, or their country.

Honor is different from pride. We can be glad for our honorable acts, but we should wince when we see people who seem to take pride in dishonorable acts. Excessive pride is toxic to our lives (see Proverbs 16:18). Honor, on the other hand, is often portrayed as the outcome of humility, the opposite of pride (see Proverbs 15:33; 29:23).

What if we are called to act in a way that is seen as dishonorable by the society in which we live? What if obedience to God's will asks us to do something that might be seen as shameful by our peers? We must remember that shame is relative to community standards. What is shameful in one community or culture may not be shameful in others. We can rest assured that God will never ask us to do something that he considers to be shameful.

It is at this point that the distinction between pride and honor must be remembered. Obeying God requires a denial of self, the opposite of pride. In today's lesson, Joseph had to swallow his pride and risk dishonor in order to obey. The verdict of history, however, is that Joseph was a man honored by God and deserving of our admiration. He sought to honor God by his obedience and was granted honor himself.

The truth is that our lack of obedience is much more likely to be a matter of pride than a matter of honor. May we take a lesson from Joseph, who sought to obey God regardless of the cost.

HONOR-SHAME CULTURES

Americans of a bygone era had a good idea of what *shame* meant (see the lesson Introduction). But the idea of an *honor-shame culture* is foreign to many in the Western world today. However, in recent years many of us have learned (to our horror) about the extreme honor-shame parts of other cultures. An Internet search will yield many examples. For instance, in 1994 a 32-year-old Muslim in Jordan slashed the throat of his 16-year-old sister. He then ran out into the street, waving the bloody knife and yelling, "I have killed my sister to cleanse my honor."

His sister's "crime" was that she had been raped by another brother. Her uncles convinced the brother who murdered her that she was too much of a disgrace to the family honor to be allowed to live. The murderer got a 15-year prison sentence, later reduced to half that. Even that was considered to be a very severe penalty for an honor crime in Jordan.

An honor-shame culture was also in force in ancient Judea. But if we read Leviticus 20:10 carefully in its context, we realize that the foundations were different. We see a "righteous" aspect of an honor-shame culture as we examine Joseph's thinking. Mary's unwed pregnancy

could have shamed Joseph. His culture demanded repercussions to make sure the shame stayed where it was presumed to belong—on her.

However, to Joseph's great credit—and as evidence of why he was chosen to be Jesus' earthly father—he demonstrated his humanity and mercy in his intent to walk the tightrope between protecting his honor and shielding Mary's privacy. We do well to remember that "Mercy triumphs over judgment!" (James 2:13).

ACTING COURAGEOUSLY

Wesley Autrey, a 50-year-old construction worker, was waiting for the subway with his two daughters in Manhattan on January 2, 2007. Nearby, Cameron Hollopeter had a seizure and fell onto the tracks just as a train was coming. Autrey later said he was thinking, "Someone has to help this guy." That's probably what most of us would have thought. But Autrey said his next thought was, "There's no one else here; you have to do it yourself."

With the train bearing down, Autrey jumped onto the tracks and pinned the thrashing man in the 21-inch-deep trough between the rails. The train brushed his cap as it rolled over him. A U.S. Senate resolution praised Autrey for acting responsibly and, as all would agree, heroically. Such courage!

Joseph is another example of courage. Awaking from his dream, he did as the angel had instructed him. He took Mary under his protection by marrying her. He named "their" son Jesus, the name that had come by divine instruction. Not many of us will be called by circumstances or divine command to risk either life or reputation as these two men did. But they stand as shining examples of what it means to act with courage.

LET'S TALK IT OVER

1. When we are falsely accused, how much time and energy should we expend to clear our names, if any?

2. How can the church do a better job of demonstrating grace to those going through an out-of-wedlock pregnancy, without seeming to condone premarital sex?

3. How can the church do a better job of ministering to those who are divorced or who are going through a divorce? Should the distinction between a *scriptural* and an *unscriptural* divorce (Matthew 5:31, 32; 1 Corinthians 7:10–15) make a difference in this regard? Explain.

4. What procedure should we use when we are about to make a decision that will have a lifelong impact?

5. What can we learn from the immediate nature of Joseph's obedience to God?**LET'S TALK IT OVER****1. When we are falsely accused, how much time and energy should we expend to clear our names, if any?**

Mary and Joseph had to live with the stigma of an out-of-wedlock pregnancy, although neither had committed sexual immorality. Jesus made it clear that those who followed Him would be insulted, persecuted, and slandered. If the evil one cannot discredit the message of God, then he will attempt to discredit its messengers.

If someone privately makes you aware of a false accusation, then it may be wise to address the issue with that person, state the facts, and just let it go. Going on a public campaign to clear your name can be counterproductive in many cases. Peter tells us to keep a clear conscience so that those who slander us will eventually be ashamed of their lies (1 Peter 3:16). If we focus on what is factually true about ourselves, then what others may think of us, for good or ill, will matter less and less as the years go by.

2. How can the church do a better job of demonstrating grace to those going through an out-of-wedlock pregnancy, without seeming to condone premarital sex?

How tragic was the case of a young woman who got an abortion because she thought that Jesus was more likely to forgive her for killing her baby than her parents and congregation would be to forgive her for getting pregnant! If a woman makes a sinful decision that results in an out-of-wedlock pregnancy, then the church should treat her with the same grace that it is to show to anyone who is caught up in the consequences of personal sin. If done properly, helping people get their lives back together probably won't be seen as an endorsement of the behavior that got them into their predicaments.

3. How can the church do a better job of ministering to those who are divorced or who are going through a divorce? Should the distinction between a *scriptural* and an *unscriptural* divorce (Matthew 5:31, 32; 1 Corinthians 7:10–15) make a difference in this regard? Explain.

Even though Mary appeared to have committed a sin that would justify a scriptural divorce, Joseph intended to act graciously. His actions may be seen as something of a model in helping us avoid two extremes. One extreme involves loving acceptance with no expectation of repentance for a sin that has been committed. The other extreme is ungracious, unloving judgment.

4. What procedure should we use when we are about to make a decision that will have a lifelong impact?

Before Joseph could go through with his plan for divorce, he received a divine revelation in a dream. This indicates that he did not yield to an immediate, knee-jerk reaction when he first heard the news of Mary's pregnancy; instead, he apparently decided to "sleep on it" first. Even though we should not expect to receive divine messages in dreams, "sleeping on it" still may be wise.

Probably the worst time to make a decision about a crisis is when you are first hit with it. The emotions wrapped up in the initial stages of a difficult circumstance can make it almost impossible to make an effective decision about how to move forward. It's better to take as much time as is reasonably available to make a prayerful decision. A "strategic delay" in this regard also will allow one to gather wise counsel from those who are spiritually mature and who are not wrapped up in the emotional aspects of the problem.

5. What can we learn from the immediate nature of Joseph's obedience to God?

There is no record that Joseph asked any questions about what the Lord required of him. He simply obeyed. That can be a model for us as long as we're careful not to overdraw our conclusions here. Remember that Mary asked a question of the angel and was not criticized for doing so. On the other hand, Zechariah *was* criticized and punished for his question (Luke 1:18–20). The difference is that Mary's question did not reflect a lack of faith, but a desire for deeper understanding.

PRAYER

God in Heaven, we thank you for your mighty provision for our salvation through your Son, Jesus, born of a virgin in fulfillment of your promise. We are humbled by the choice of Joseph to be obedient even at the risk of dishonor. We pray that we will always choose obedience too. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.