

The Virgin Birth

Scripture: Matthew 1:18–25

Code: 2181

INTRODUCTION

Matthew 1:18-25 deals with the virgin birth of Jesus Christ. Matthew begins his Gospel with this very important passage:

"Now the birth of Jesus Christ was in this way: When, as His mother, Mary, was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. Then Joseph, her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privately. But while he thought on these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary, thy wife; for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call His name JESUS; for He shall save His people from their sins. Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call His name Immanuel, which, being interpreted, is God with us. Then Joseph, being raised from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife, and knew her not till she had brought forth her first-born son; and he called His name JESUS."

A. The Deity of Christ's Being Denied

1. BY PEOPLE OF THE PAST

In Matthew 22:42, Jesus asked the Pharisees a question that has been voiced in every generation since then. Jesus said, "What think ye of Christ? Whose son is He?..." That's the question which needs to be asked in every age, to every person. Now the Jewish leaders believed that the promised Messiah would be the son of David. They believed, from a human viewpoint, that He would be a member of the royal lineage of David. And frankly, they weren't sure of much more than that. For the most part, they didn't perceive that the Messiah would be God in human flesh, though there is some indication that a few of them may have believed that to be true. The preponderance of the Jewish people at that time seemed to have been convinced that the King they were going to gain would be of the seed of David, a human being in every sense of royal lineage, so much so, that when Jesus claimed to be both the son of David and the Son of God, they accused Him of blasphemy. They expected Him to be of the royal line of David, but apparently not to be deity in human flesh.

2. BY PEOPLE OF THE PRESENT

People today are still denying that. They are willing to let Jesus be of royal seed as a son of David, but they're not anxious for Him to be deity--God in human flesh. It's alright for Him to be the son of David, but not the Son of God. I am often reminded of the lip service people give to a doctrine they don't believe when, at Christmastime, they sing: Christ, by highest heaven adored; Christ the everlasting Lord! Late in time behold Him come, Offspring of the virgin's womb. Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; Hail the incarnate Deity, Pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel, Hark, the herald angels sing, Glory to the newborn King. Now that verse of the Christmas carol is a verse that is built around the theme that Christ is God. And even though the world may sing the song, they're not really ready to receive the reality of that truth.

B. The Virginity of Christ's Birth Discussed

1. THE STATISTICS EXAMINED

Over ten years ago, Redbook magazine took a poll of students in Protestant seminaries. 56% of those students studying for the ministry rejected the idea of the virgin birth. (That's the legacy of modern liberalism.) The Survey Research Center of the University of California at Berkeley polled the denominations to get their view on the virgin birth: 69% of the American Baptists believed in the virgin birth, 66% of the Lutherans believed in it, 57% of the United Presbyterians, 39% of the Episcopalians, 34% of the Methodists, and 21% of the Congregationalists. If the liberal church is not even ready to accept the deity of Jesus Christ and His virgin birth, it seems rather obvious that the world wouldn't be beating a path to embrace this truth either.

But you shouldn't be surprised at such a response. The Apostle Paul said in Romans 3:3-4a, "For what if some did not believe? Shall their unbelief make the faithfulness of God without effect? God forbid: yea, let God be true, but every man a liar...." Don't ever base your theology on majority rule. And besides those who deny the virgin birth and the related deity of Jesus Christ, there are people who just ignore that truth. But as we simply open our eyes and look at Matthew 1:18-25, we find that we cannot be honestly objective and still doubt it, deny it, or ignore it, because it is clearly there.

2. THE STANDARD EXPRESSED

Dr. Walvoord, president of Dallas Theological Seminary, says, "The incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ is the central fact of Christianity. Upon it the whole superstructure of Christian theology depends." The whole essence of Christianity is predicated on the fact that Jesus is God in human flesh, something that is made clear at the very birth of Christ. The virgin birth is an essential doctrine, for if Jesus had a human father, then the Bible is untrustworthy, because the Bible claims He did not have one. And if Jesus was born simply of human parents, there is no way to describe the reason for His supernatural life. His virgin birth, His substitutionary death, His bodily resurrection, and His Second Coming are a package of deity. You cannot isolate those truths, accepting only one and leaving the rest, or accepting them all but one. You must either believe all of those realities that are the manifestation of His deity or you are guilty of being inconsistent, because those truths are inseparably interrelated. And so we must face the question that Jesus posed to the Pharisees again: Whose Son is He? The son of David in humanity, and the Son of God in deity. Both of those are essential to a proper understanding of the incarnation. Jesus is God in a human body. Humanly through the lineage of David He gains the right to rule the world, and from the standpoint of deity He gains the very essence of the nature of God by having been born without a human father through the agency of the Spirit of God Himself.

So Matthew, in writing his Gospel, squarely faces his Jewish readers and the readers of all the ages as he gives them the answer in chapter 1. The genealogy of Jesus tells you that Jesus is David's son, and the birth of Jesus tells you that He is God's Son. Now if the genealogy were all that could be said with reference to His identity, then Christ would have had the legal right to be the King, but He could have never redeemed men. He could have never conquered death, sin, and Satan in hell. To accomplish that, He had to be God, and such became Jesus, the God-Man -- 100% deity and 100% humanity. Chapter 1 presents both the human and the divine natures of Christ.

3. THE SLANDER ENCOUNTERED

Matthew may have been writing in an apologetic manner. By that, I don't mean he was apologizing for what he was saying. Apologetics comes from a Greek word apologia, which means "a speech in defense of," and it may be that he was actually writing not only to lay out the facts, but to counter a certain slander. For example, we know that at the time of Jesus' life, there were some who accused Him of being an illegitimate son born out of wedlock, the son of a Roman soldier who cohabitated with Mary, who consequently was an adulteress. That kind of slander was in existence at that time. And Matthew purposed in this text to set such a slander right. The virgin birth was essential enough for the Apostles' Creed to speak of Jesus as conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary. That's always been a cardinal fact of Christianity, and it's always been one that has been attacked by false doctrine.

4. THE SUPERNATURAL EXPLAINED AWAY

Now the world has had its unusual births. I remember reading about the first quintuplets and more recently about some sextuplets. I even thought the birth of our first son at over ten pounds was unusual until I read about a baby that was born at over sixteen pounds. So, there have been some unusual births -- we are aware of that -- but there is no birth ever in the history of humanity that is as singularly spectacular as the birth of Jesus Christ. And any rejection of Christ's supernatural origin leaves His supernatural life, death, and resurrection inexplicable. You must have it all, or none of it makes sense. And if Jesus wasn't virgin born, then the claim that He can save is highly questionable. This is why Matthew begins with the affirmation of the virgin birth.

By the way, it's most interesting how certain liberal theologians deal with this problem here. They say, "Well, yes, we do agree that this is an account of a virgin birth, but after all, the Gospel of Matthew was written by a well-meaning fellow who was not inspired by God." They say that at around the time which he wrote it, between A.D. 40 and 70, there were a lot of virgin birth myths floating around. And because it was a popular thought of that period, they say that Matthew chose one such myth and incorporated it in his story about Jesus.

There have always been a number of virgin birth myths from time to time, and guess who designed each one of them? Satan, the master counterfeiter and deceiver. Even many writers from as far back as Origen in the early centuries of Christendom have clearly shown us the incredulity of such tales, which can hardly be compared with the historicity of the virgin birth. Let me offer one example:

There was a legend that Alexander the Great, the son of Philip of Macedon, who conquered the world for Greece, was virgin born. It was believed that the god Zeus, in the form of a serpent snake, cohabitated with Olympias, the wife of Philip of Macedon. Frequently in Greek legend you find Zeus taking the form of an animal to interact with humanity, and sometimes as a bird or even as foam on the sea. About the legend in view, it is said that when Philip discerned what his wife had done, his own sexual desire was so dulled that the product of the union had to have been born of the snake. Consequently, Alexander the Great was the child of Zeus. Needless to say, such an asinine story can hardly be compared with that of the Word of God.

Now to say that Matthew just happened to utilize one of those myths and applied it to the life of Jesus is to do two things: to accuse Matthew of being a blatant liar, and to say that the Word of God is in fact not the Word of God, but merely the word of man. But let me assure you, beloved, that Matthew's account is not fantasy -- it is history.

5. THE SCRIPTURES EVIDENCED

There wasn't really a lot of talk about the Messiah being virgin born, because it was somewhat veiled in the Old Testament, appearing in some places like Isaiah 7:14 or Jeremiah 31:22. There was also evidence that the Messiah would be God, but it was somewhat veiled as well. It really wasn't until the New Testament that the full "mystery of godliness" (1 Tim. 3:16), God being manifest in the flesh, was unfolded. Naturally then, if it is clear in the New Testament that Jesus is God in human flesh, what will be the number one point of attack of every false system? The deity of Jesus Christ -- invariably they all do it. Now the facts are clear in the narrative that from the very beginning, Jesus was the Son of God, God in human flesh...no matter what the Jews may or may not have believed, no matter what the legends were, no matter what the critics said, no matter what the slander said -- Matthew records the facts.

Now, let's see how this incredible event occurred by examining five distinct elements appearing in the narrative: the virgin birth conceived, confronted, clarified, connected, and consummated. Those are not profound words, but merely hooks to hang your thoughts on. First of all...

I. THE VIRGIN BIRTH CONCEIVED (v. 18)

This miracle is so incredible! I hope you haven't heard it so often that your senses are dulled to the spectacular unbelievable nature of this supernatural event. Verse 18 says, "Now the birth of Jesus Christ was in this way: When, as His mother, Mary, was espoused [betrothed] to Joseph, before they

came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit." Here Matthew tells us that Mary was impregnated by the Holy Spirit. Let me just show you something about the verse that I think is fascinating. The word "birth" is the very same term in the Greek as the word which is translated "genealogy" in 1:1. In other words, Matthew is simply giving the genealogy of Jesus from the human side in 1:1: "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham," and the divine side in 1:18: "Now the birth [genealogy] of Jesus Christ was in this way...." And then follows the statement about Jesus being conceived by the Holy Spirit. So Matthew 1 presents two sides of the same genealogy.

A. The Bride Of Joseph (v. 18a)

"Now the birth of Jesus Christ was in this way: When, as His mother, Mary..."

1. HER IDENTITY

We don't know much about Mary, but let me see if I can pull together some information about her.

a. John 19:25 -- "Now there stood by the cross of Jesus His mother, and His mother's sister, Mary, the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene." Within her immediate family, we know that Mary had a sister, who apparently was also named Mary--a practice which was not necessarily uncommon.

b. Luke 1:36a -- The angel speaking to Mary said, "And, behold, thy cousin, Elisabeth, hath also conceived a son...." And who was her son? John the Baptist. So, besides evidence of Mary's sister, we also learn that she had a cousin, Elisabeth.

c. Luke 3:23 -- If we can safely assume that the genealogy in Luke is actually of Mary, we can conclude that her father's name was Heli.

2. HER INTEGRITY

Her early life being spent in Nazareth, Mary was probably poor, hardworking, and no doubt a very righteous lady. If you want a good character study of Mary, all you need to do is simply listen to her. In Luke 1 you have a parallel account of the birth and its annunciation: "And the angel answered, and said unto her, The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee; therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God" (v. 35). Mary's response to this news in verse 38 tells us something about her character:

a. Submission to the Word of God

"And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to Thy word...." And about Mary, Elisabeth said, "And blessed is she that believed..." (v. 45a).

We learn a second thing about Mary: not only did she submit to the word of God, but she was a woman of...

b. Faith in the Promise of God

If an angel came and told you that the Son of God would miraculously be born to you, what would you say? Would you have said, "Be it unto me according to the word of God"? Today, the natural response of most women would be: "Say Joseph, I had this weird dream. I've gotta go see a counselor." But the great faith of Mary is characteristic of a righteous person, who submits to the authority of the word of God and who lives by faith in that word, even when it makes absolutely no sense. There was no human historical precedent of a virgin birth for which she could say, "This is true"--that's a woman who's righteous. She accepted it. And most lovely was her response, known as the Magnificat: "And Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior. For He hath regarded the low estate of His handmaiden; for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. For He that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is His name" (Lk. 1:46-49).

Oh, what a godly lady! There was no doubt or misgiving in her mind; only an instant submission in belief that this in fact was God's truth. This righteous lady was a true Old Testament saint, who perceived when God's truth was spoken and praised God for what He was going to do. Ironically, her name in Greek is Mariam, which comes from a word meaning "rebelliousness." The poor lady had been badly named, because she wasn't rebellious at all.

B. The Betrothal Of Mary (v. 18b)

"...Mary, was espoused [betrothed] to Joseph, before they came together..."

1. THE BRIDEGROOM

About Joseph we know very little. He is described by a Greek term that can be translated "carpenter" or "mason." It may have been that a man did both. If he built houses, he would need to be able to lay the bricks and frame the windows and the doors, too, so perhaps he did both. At any rate, he was undoubtedly a poor, hardworking man, who is identified in verse 19 as having been a righteous person. He was a godly man, and like Mary, was a true Old Testament saint.

2. THE BACKGROUND

Joseph and Mary were probably young, most Bible scholars believing that they were in their teen years since marriages in that day were commonly initiated when a girl was age twelve or thirteen. These two were most likely older teenagers when they were espoused (or more accurately, betrothed) because of the tremendous maturity we see in their responses recorded in Scripture. What exactly does it mean that they were betrothed? Does that mean they were engaged, or that they were going steady, with Mary wearing Joseph's ring around her neck on a chain and his letterman's jacket as well? To get a better cultural understanding of the betrothal practices, let me give you a little background.

The Old Testament and the rabbinical writings distinguish two stages in Hebrew marriage. One was called the Kiddushin, the other, the Huppah.

a. The Kiddushin

This first stage was the betrothal period, mentioned in Deuteronomy 20:7. If after two families or individuals had drawn up a binding contract that promised marriage, and during the betrothal period the contract had been violated, then an official divorce would take place. Such a practice means that a betrothed couple was constituted as legally married, even though there were no physical relationships whatever. This period, normally twelve months in duration, served as a period of protection for the would-be husband and wife so each partner's fidelity could be established. If the girl became pregnant through being unfaithful, it would become manifest in that period. It was also a time in which any potential problems could be worked out, even though social contact between the couple was relatively limited.

So, the betrothal was primarily a promise or contract that was made. Now at the end of the betrothal period was...

b. The Huppah

When the first stage was completed, the second stage took place, which was the actual wedding. The weddings back then lasted for approximately seven days. If those of you who have to marry off your daughter now think it's a big procedure, how would you like to have the neighborhood over for seven days? You would have to feed them and provide drink like at the wedding at Cana, where they ran out of wine until Jesus performed His miracle (Jn. 2:1-10).

When a daughter was given away in marriage, the father expected payment in exchange, called the mohar, which could vary in amount depending on the girl. It might be anything from a couple dozen sheep to a lame chicken, I suppose. There may have been some girls whose fathers just said, "You can have her for nothing. In fact, I'll throw in a couple sheep." Seriously, though, the price that was paid served several purposes: It compensated the father for the expense of the wedding; it also acted as life insurance for the wife (Normally, the father would hold it in trust and if the husband died, he would give it back to the daughter.); and thirdly, it was kind of a divorce insurance, because the husband of course would have to give it up unless he stayed married to the girl and received it back by inheritance after the death of the father.

So the betrothal period then, was the period prior to the actual wedding when the marriage was finally consummated physically. It was a period of testing and probation to insure the bride's virginity and the fidelity of both partners. The use of the words husband and wife with reference to Joseph

and Mary (cf. Mt. 1:19-20) merely indicates the validity of their betrothal, not that their marriage had actually been consummated. This is clear from verse 25a, which says, "And [he] knew her not till she had brought forth her first-born son...." Similarly, verse 18b says, "...before they came together...." In other words, it was in this betrothal period that Mary was made to be with child by the Holy Spirit. And on the evidence of Joseph's righteousness, as a man who would have not violated God's standard, there should have been no question that Joseph was not the father (1:20, 24). God looks with great concern on purity, and virginity is highly valued by God. It's a sacred thing, and not something to be trifled with. I'm reminded of how beautiful virginity is when I see how honored Mary was because of it.

C. The Birth By The Spirit (v. 18c)

"...she was found with child of the Holy Spirit."

Let's look at the more detailed account in Luke 1 concerning...

1. THE REVELATION TO MARY

a. The Appearance (vv. 26-29)

"And in the sixth month [of Elisabeth's pregnancy] the angel, Gabriel, was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou who art highly favored, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women. And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and considered in her mind what manner of greeting this should be." I can imagine her reaction to such an unusual event. Mary was just a simple girl up there in the hayseed part of the country where everybody was a farmer. And in this relatively insignificant place (when compared with Jerusalem), the great glorious angel Gabriel, the hero of Yahweh, appeared to Mary, who wondered at the reason she should be honored with his presence.

b. The Announcement (vv. 30-35)

"And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary; for thou hast found favor with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call His name JESUS. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God shall give unto Him the throne of His father, David. And He shall reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of His kingdom there shall be no end. Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? [Here Mary clearly affirms her virginity.] And the angel answered, and said unto her, The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee; therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God." What an incredible announcement to a nobody lady living in a little dinky place called Nazareth! And so, when Mary became pregnant, she knew why. Poor Joseph didn't know why because the angel hadn't appeared to him yet. Let's look at...

2. THE RESPONSE BY JOSEPH

When he found out, he was shocked, because he knew the quality of Mary's character and the righteous standard by which she lived. Infidelity was totally out of character for her -- it made no sense at all. He was shocked because he knew Deuteronomy 22 well enough to know that when a woman became pregnant with a child outside of wedlock, the punishment was death: "If any man take a wife, and go in unto her, and hate her, and give occasions of speech against her, and bring up an evil name upon her, and say, I took this woman, and when I came to her, I found her not a maid [virgin]then they shall bring out the damsel to the door of her father's house, and the men of her city shall stone her with stones that she die, because she hath wrought folly in Israel, to play the harlot in her father's house; so shalt thou put evil away from among you. If a man be found lying with a woman married to an husband, then they shall both of them die, both the man that lay with the woman, and the woman. So shalt thou put away evil from Israel. If a damsel who is a virgin be betrothed unto an husband, and a man find her in the city, and lie with her, then ye shall bring them both out unto the gate of that city, and ye shall stone them..." (vv. 13-14, 21-24a). Understanding that Old Testament law demanded Mary's death if she were guilty, Joseph was literally rocked to the very

core of his heart, because he loved Mary.

3. THE REACTION OF THE PEOPLE

It would have been difficult for Mary to protect her reputation. If she had gone out and said, "Listen folks, this baby is conceived by God," people probably would have replied, "Sure. That's a good excuse, Mary. We thought we had heard them all, but that's a new one." The blessed Spirit of God protected it for her, right here in the pages of the Word of God. Let there be no reproach on Mary ever.

If Jesus were not virgin born... If Jesus was only an ordinary man, then we can conclude that He was probably born like all other men; but He isn't like anybody else, and He wasn't born like anybody else. If He was simply the illegitimate child of Mary's infidelity or if He was the child of Joseph's natural sexual activity with Mary, then He is not God. And if He's not God, His claims are lies, and if His claims are lies, His salvation is a hoax, and if His salvation is a hoax, then we are damned. So Matthew clearly records for us that God entered the flesh by a virgin, in which seed was planted by the Holy Spirit.

You say, "Well, how does that work?" Don't ask me that. People always want to ask those kind of questions for which the Bible doesn't give answers. I don't even understand how normal human birth works, and I don't know any doctor who really understands the mystery of it either. Don't ask me how the virgin birth could occur. God did it.

So a cloud of suspicion, shame, and scandal soon hung ominously over Mary. In all of human history there had never been a virgin birth, so when the people saw an unwed mother, there was only one conclusion that could be made...except in this case. There was another conclusion:

4. THE RESULT OF GOD'S WORKING

The Holy Spirit was responsible for this conception, as the angel said. This would be nothing new for the Holy Spirit, because His work was commonly one of creation, wasn't it?

a. In Creation

In Genesis 1:2, He is identified as the One who actually carried out the creation of the heavens and the earth. In Acts 2, He moved upon the believers gathered in the upper room and created the church. Therefore, why shouldn't He be able to create the marvelous miracle of the virgin birth? Such a miracle shouldn't have been shocking, but rather expected.

b. In Redemption

1) Genesis 3:15 -- In this verse, the Lord God was cursing Satan behind the serpent for having caused Adam and Eve to fall: "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; he shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel." He said, "Look Satan, someday there will come a woman, who will have a child that you will wound at Calvary, but that child will inflict you with a mortal wound." You'll notice it says that this promised individual would be the seed of the woman. Only one time in the history of the world did a woman ever have a seed, which normally is ascribed to the man.

2) Galatians 4:4 -- Paul said, "But, when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law." And you'll remember, that because Christ was "made of a woman," the virgin birth was able to bypass the curse on Jeconiah.

Had Jesus had no human parents, He wouldn't have been man, partaking of our flesh, and would have lacked compassion on humanity. On the other hand, had Jesus had two human parents, He could not have avoided the contamination of humanity. So He had to be the child of man and yet the child of God, and that's exactly what He was. He was born of a sinner and yet He was sinless, because He was equally born of God. Deity cancelled humanity's curse: the water of the nature of God drowned the fire of the nature of man.

II. THE VIRGIN BIRTH CONFRONTED (v. 19)

What about poor Joseph? He didn't know what was happening. His world had just come to an end.

Joseph, a just and righteous man, was deeply committed to Mary. He no doubt anticipated the day when they both would be proven faithful during the period of betrothal and could then consummate the marriage. Verse 19 says, "Then Joseph, her husband, being a just [or righteous] man, and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privately." Now all of a sudden we see the virgin birth confronted: Joseph had to face the issue of his fiancée's apparent unfaithfulness. Unaware that a miracle had taken place, he sought to find a solution to this situation in a way that demonstrates his righteous character and concern for Mary. Joseph was a just man who did not want to make a public example of the woman he loved.

A. Joseph's Righteous Character (v. 19a)

"Then Joseph, her husband, being a just man..."

The first participle in verse 19 is a description of the character of Joseph, who was a righteous Jew, a true Old Testament saint. And do you know what a godly man would say to himself? "I can't marry this lady in her condition. She's violated the principles of God. Even though I care about her, even though I don't understand this thing, even though everything is a mystery to me...as a just man, I must do what the law requires." To call him a just man puts him in the same class with Zacharias and Elisabeth, because the Bible says that "they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord, blameless" (Lk. 1:6). It also puts him in the category of Simeon, of whom the Scripture says "was righteous and devout" (Lk. 2:25). He was a real God-fearing Jew, who knew that he had to be obedient to God's laws, for which there are consequences. So the first prompting to action came from Joseph's righteousness, while the second prompting came from...

B. Joseph's Real Concern (v. 19b)

"...and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privately."

Two courses of action were open to Joseph in his day and age. Had he been living in the day when Deuteronomy was written, the law would have required one thing...death. But the laxness with which Jews in Joseph's day kept the law of God, had allowed the substitution of less stringent laws for the ones that God had ordained (which was one reason that their country had gotten into so much trouble). Joseph's concern for Mary motivated him to take action...

1. NOT FOR PUBLIC DISCLOSURE

Joseph could have made her a public example by charging her openly in a public court with having committed adultery. She would be shamed, brought to trial, and convicted in front of everybody, so that her reputation would be ruined.

2. BUT FOR PRIVATE DIVORCE

The other possibility involved a quieter method. The two parties would get together before two or three witnesses and write out a private bill of divorcement, such as is indicated in Deuteronomy 24. In this case, there would be no judicial procedure, no public knowledge, no fanfare. In fact, in that day you did not even need to write down the cause for the divorce in the statement, so that the spouse could go away without anybody ever really knowing what had happened. It was done secretly. Now this wasn't necessarily God's pattern, but this is what was allowable in the laxness of the day in which Joseph lived.

By the way, the phrase "put her away" means "to divorce" (Gk. *apoluo*). Joseph could divorce her, even though she wasn't officially his wife, because the betrothal constituted a legal marriage contract. If he chose to divorce her, he would have to return the mohar, or the dowry, and destroy the contract. Unwilling to make Mary a public example, he thought, "I'll just put her away privately."

Let us look at the third option, that was made available to Joseph in...

III. THE VIRGIN BIRTH CLARIFIED (vv. 20-21)

A. The Mulling Over Of The Divine Circumstance (v. 20a)

"But while he thought on these things..."

Joseph was faced with a difficult decision. No doubt he went to bed one night in Nazareth, meditating and mulling over what he had to do. And while he was mulling over this confusing situation that he

had to confront, he fell asleep. B. The Method Of The Divine Communication (v. 20b)

"...behold, an angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream..."

This was not a dream like you would have a dream in the realm of imagination. It was a dream used to communicate God's revelation in the realm of reality. This method of communication is not uncommon in Matthew, where it occurs in other places (2:12, 13, 19; 27:19), so this is not a totally isolated kind of situation.

Using an angel in the dream, God communicated...

C. The Message Of The Divine Conception (v. 20c)

"...Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary, thy wife; for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit."

Reinforcing the fact of Joseph's royal lineage, the angel comforted him with the reality of God's intervention in the virgin birth. This miraculous birth required no human father, for it was the divinely conceived birth of God in human flesh which enabled Jesus to become both man and God. This truth was both explicitly and implicitly stated in the Old Testament in such verses as...

1. JEREMIAH 23:5 -- The Messiah is called in Hebrew tsemach, which means "branch." Here He is identified as the branch of David.

2. ISAIAH 4:2 -- The Messiah is also identified as "the branch of the LORD." So, not only is He the offspring of David, but the offspring of God as well.

3. ISAIAH 9:6 -- The "son" promised to Israel was also called "Wonderful, Counselor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace."

4. JEREMIAH 31:22b -- "...For the LORD hath created a new thing in the earth, A woman shall compass a man." In other words, a woman on her own shall develop a man. You say, "Are you sure that's a Messianic prophecy?" Well, that passage in Jeremiah is stated by rabbis to be Messianic. In fact, some rabbis interestingly enough said that the Messiah would have no earthly father, and that His birth would be without any defects, unlike that of other men, but like the dew of the Lord which drops upon the grass without the action of man. Such interpretations were used in texts like Jeremiah 31.

And so, Joseph was to know that he had nothing to fear in taking Mary as his wife, for what was conceived in her was of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, he was told...

D. The Meaning Of The Divine Calling (v. 21)

"And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call His name JESUS [Heb. Jeshua = "Jehovah shall save"]; for he shall save His people from their sins."

1. THE SON OF MARY (v. 21a)

"And she shall bring forth a son..."

You'll notice that Matthew didn't say that Joseph would have a son. The Bible is very careful about never naming Joseph as the father of Jesus. For example, in...

a. Matthew 2:13b -- "...Arise, and take the young Child and His mother, and flee into Egypt...." Why didn't the angel say, "Take your child and your wife"? The mention of Mary as the only parent removes Joseph from being identified as Jesus' actual father.

b. Matthew 2:20a -- "...Arise, and take the young Child and His mother, and go into the land of Israel...." The child was always correctly associated with His mother, and never with Joseph as His father.

The verse also identifies Jesus as...

2. THE SAVIOR OF MANY (v. 21b)

"...and thou shalt call His name JESUS; for He shall save His people from their sins."

The reason that He came was to accomplish salvation, wasn't it? Acts 4:12 says, "Neither is there salvation in any other; for there is no other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved." Only Jesus, the sole God-Man, is the One who saves. Psalm 20:7a says that "some trust in chariots, and some in horses," but that it is the Lord alone that "saveth His anointed...with the

saving strength of His right hand" (v. 6). Even today there are those who trust in physical strength, knowledge, intuition, reputation, prestige, position, technology, personal connections, or education, but only Jesus can save people from their sins. Only He is mighty enough to save.

Fourthly, let's consider...

IV. THE VIRGIN BIRTH CONNECTED (vv. 22-23)

A. The Statements Of Purpose

Just so that this event doesn't appear as if it was some last-minute afterthought that he selected from a number of myths like the critics assume, Matthew comes in with a commentary in verses 22 and 23. The scene with the angel is interrupted as Matthew adds his explanatory comments. In fact, fifty times in his Gospel, Matthew quotes the Old Testament, and seventy-six times he alludes to it, using the formula: "Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying" (v. 22). Of course, whenever the prophet spoke it was actually the Lord speaking. In this particular case, Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14: "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call His name Immanuel, which, being interpreted, is God with us" (v. 23). He connects the virgin birth to the Old Testament in order to verify that the promise of God had been fulfilled, something they should have known.

B. The Selection Of Parthenos

There is a lot of discussion about why Isaiah used the word `alma, which is the Hebrew word for "young woman," rather than betula, which often means "virgin." I believe that there is no reason to argue about it at all. Suffice it to say that the former word in Isaiah 7:14 is best translated "virgin." Now, the critics can confuse the passage, but they can't erase the clear commentary of Matthew on it, who used the word parthenos, which means "virgin." Matthew knew what Isaiah meant, even if the critics don't. And those who deny the virgin birth have a tough time getting around the fact that Matthew says that Mary didn't have any sexual relationships with a man until after Jesus was born. Why do people want to argue about Isaiah's choice of words? Why don't they just listen to God's commentary on the issue?

C. The Setting Of The Prophecy (v. 23)

The setting of Isaiah's prophecy is very simple. King Ahaz was terrified that the kingdom of Judah might be destroyed by Syria and Israel. So God spoke through Isaiah and said, "Let Me give you a promise: Nothing is going to happen to the kingly line, and here's a sign to prove My words true -- a virgin shall be with child and that child will be Immanuel." D. The Significance Of The Promise
Isaiah said, "Look down the corridors of history and there will be a virgin-born child, who will guarantee you that David's line will never be broken." And Jesus came into the world, as the fulfillment of that prophecy given by Isaiah to Ahaz, to show that God would keep His promise that the throne of David would never be broken. Jesus truly became "Immanuel, which, being interpreted, is God with us" (Mt. 1:23b). The last two letters of that title, el, form part of God's name in such titles as El Shaddai (Gen. 17:1), El Elyon (Gen. 14:18), and El Mekaddishkem (Lev. 20:8).

Now you say, "But they never called Him `Immanuel." No, that is not actually a name, but rather a description of who He is. The Old Testament applied many titles to the Messiah that didn't serve as common names.

V. THE VIRGIN BIRTH CONSUMMATED (vv. 24-25)

A. A Wonderful Parent (v. 24)

"Then Joseph, being raised from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife"

Don't you think that was the most wonderful nap Joseph ever had? When he got up and it was all clear, he probably thought, "I'm not just marrying Mary, I'm getting the Son of God thrown in on the deal!" Joseph must have been a good man. Can you imagine the Almighty God of the universe depositing His only Son in the home of a man who wouldn't be a good father? I can't. I just feel badly that not more is said about Joseph. He must have been dead by the time Jesus died, because no

mention of him is made anywhere. At the cross, do you remember what Jesus did? He looked down at His mother and John, and said, "...Woman, behold thy son! Then saith He to the disciple, Behold thy mother!..." (Jn. 19:26b-27a). Jesus had to give Mary into John's care presumably because Joseph was already dead. We don't know much about Joseph, but I imagine he was a wonderful man because God had entrusted him with His only Son. He must have been some father to be able to deal with a perfect son. Can you imagine the frustration of trying to guide a perfect son who might say, "No Dad, it's this way"? At any rate, imagine what joy there must have been when he woke up and knew he would be doing the right thing by marrying Mary. But the marriage wasn't immediately consummated in the complete sense, because there had to be...

B. A Waiting Period (v. 25)

"And [Joseph] knew her not till she had brought forth her first-born son; and he called His name JESUS."

They had the wedding, but Joseph and Mary abstained from having sexual relations until after that baby was born. There's an interesting footnote: The literal Greek of this verse could be rendered, "And he was not in the habit of knowing her until she had brought forth her first-born son" -- the implication being that once she had brought forth her firstborn son, he was in the habit of knowing her in a normal human relationship which produced many other children. People always say, "Well, do you think they had other children?" I know they had other children; the Bible makes reference to them and even gives their names (Mt. 12:47; 13:55-56; Jn. 7:3).

Conclusion

The supernatural birth of Jesus is the only way to account for the life that He lived. Somebody once asked a Christian, "Well, if I told you that a child had been born today in the city over there in that hospital, without a human father, would you believe me?" -- to which the Christian replied, "Yes, if he lived as Jesus lived." That's the key!

At the start of His life, the Jews said that Jesus was the son of a man who seduced Mary, and at the end of His life they said that the disciples had stolen His body and faked the resurrection. Matthew begins his Gospel with the answer to the first slander, and ends it with the answer to the last slander, and in between he is busily fighting all the other slanders against the dear Lord Jesus Christ. He was none other than God in human flesh, and Matthew tells us He came to dwell with the sick to heal them, with the demon possessed to liberate them, with the poor in spirit to bless them, with the care-ridden to free them from care, with the lepers to cleanse them, with the hungry to feed them, but most of all he says that He came to dwell with the lost, in order that He might save them (Mt. 18:11). He was Immanuel, God with us, who, though He was infinitely rich, became poor, assuming our human nature. He entered our sin-polluted atmosphere without ever being tainted by it, took our guilt, bore our griefs, carried our sorrows, was wounded with our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities, went to heaven to prepare a place for us, sent His Spirit to dwell in our hearts, right now makes intercession for us, and will someday come to take us to be with Him. No wonder the Apostle Paul said, "...for your sakes He became poor, that ye through His poverty might be rich" (2 Cor. 8:9b).

Focusing on the Facts

1. What were the Jewish expectations of the Messiah? (see p. 1)
2. Why did the Jews accuse Jesus of blasphemy? (see p. 1)
3. Upon what fact is the whole essence of Christianity predicated? (see p. 2)
4. If Jesus had a human father, what two things would we have to conclude? (see pp. 2-3)
5. Whose son does the record of the birth show Jesus to be? (see p. 3)
6. What was the slander that Matthew was trying to counter? (see p. 3)
7. What do liberal theologians consider the account of the virgin birth to be? (see p. 4)
8. What is the number one point of doctrine that nearly every false system attacks? (see p. 5)

9. Who apparently was Mary's sister (Jn. 19:25)? cousin (Lk. 1:36)? and father (Lk. 3:23)? (see pp. 5-6)
10. What do we learn about Mary's character from her response to the angelic announcement in Luke 1:38, 45-49? (see p. 6)
11. What is all that we know about Joseph? (see p. 7)
12. Describe the first stage of the marriage process. What was the betrothal period designed to test? (see pp. 7-8)
13. Why were Joseph and Mary identified as husband and wife before the marriage had been consummated? (see p. 8)
14. What would have been Joseph's response when he learned of Mary's pregnancy? Why? (see p. 9)
15. According to Deuteronomy 22, what was to be the punishment for a woman who became pregnant out of wedlock? (see p. 10)
16. What conclusions must be made if Jesus were not virgin born? (see p. 10)
17. Why is it not unusual that the Holy Spirit was responsible for the conception of Jesus? (see p. 11)
18. What did God promise in Genesis 3:15? (see p. 11)
19. Why was Jesus sinless even though He was born of a sinner? (see p. 11)
20. On what basis were Joseph, Zacharias, and Elisabeth considered to be righteous? (see p. 12)
21. What course of action did Joseph choose in dealing with the seemingly unlawful pregnancy of Mary? Why? (p. 13)
22. What was the unique kind of dream given to Joseph used for? (see p. 13)
23. Why was Mary's child to be named Jesus? (see p. 14; Mt. 1:21)
24. Why did Matthew connect the virgin birth to the Old Testament? (see p. 15)
25. Why was the prophecy of a virgin bearing Immanuel originally given? (see p. 16)
26. Why do we assume that Joseph was already dead at the time of Jesus' crucifixion? (see pp. 16-17)
27. What is the implication in Matthew 1:25 regarding the sexual relations of Joseph and Mary? (see p. 17)
28. What is the only way that Jesus' perfect life can be accounted for?

Pondering the Principles

1. What great truths are conveyed in the verse of the carol printed on page 2?
Were you surprised to find so much truth packed into one verse? When you sing hymns at church, are you aware of the truths they are proclaiming, or do you find your mind going into neutral? When the choir sings the anthem or a soloist sings a spiritual song, are you more interested in what the bulletin says or the appearance of the soloist, than the truths that are being reinforced in song? Consciously try to cultivate the habit of concentrating on what you are singing and what you are hearing as you worship the Lord.
2. What do you remember about Joseph's and Mary's responses to the conception which showed that they were spiritually mature?
Would you have chosen such seemingly insignificant people to parent the Son of God? If you had been living at that time in history, do you think God might have chosen you, based on your spiritual qualifications and faith in Him? If not, what are some things that need to change in your life? As you pray for those things, identify some steps that you could take to be used of God for a high and holy purpose.
3. Like Joseph, do you demonstrate concern for your spouse by not making a public spectacle of him or her?
For some unexplainable reason, people think that others are entertained when they make their spouse the butt of a joke. But in spite of a spouse's patience in putting up with criticism, such lack of

concern only serves to alienate a couple from each other. If you catch yourself criticizing your spouse, immediately ask for his or her forgiveness. Rather than using destructive words, write down some encouraging, uplifting words that could nurture the type of relationship with your spouse that God desires. Wives, take time to memorize Proverbs 31:26, and husbands, 1 Peter 3:7.

4. Not many people are willing to put obedience to spiritual principles before the gratification of physical desires. How did Joseph demonstrate that he was willing to do this when he found out that Mary was pregnant?

Would you have followed his example, or the example of those who often get married against wise biblical counsel? Commit yourself to consider the lasting consequences of decisions made regarding spiritual issues. To better evaluate how spiritually-minded you are, ask yourself two questions as you choose a particular course of action: What would Jesus have done in this situation? and, Will this have eternal consequences?

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