

## “A Man Among Men” (Matthew 1:18-25)

Have you ever found yourself in an incredibly trying situation and felt like you were at your wit's end? Perhaps you were in the middle of a family, work, or church dispute and you felt caught between a rock and a hard place. Did you feel all alone and without hope? Was your faith severely tested?

**1. Joseph's Background.** I can relate to your experience. My name is Joseph.<sup>1</sup> Over 2,000 years ago, I adopted Jesus Christ as my own son.<sup>2</sup> Please allow me to tell you my story. My father's name was Jacob.<sup>3</sup> I came from “the house and line of David” and the lineage of the Messiah.<sup>4</sup> As a young man I worked with my father. I learned the family business and became a carpenter.<sup>5</sup> We were a family of Jews living in what had become a Gentile land. Nazareth was my hometown.<sup>6</sup> It is located in lower Galilee, almost half way between the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean. During the years that I was a carpenter in Nazareth, the town was large enough to support a synagogue, but hardly more than that.<sup>7</sup> Nazareth was so small and insignificant that in John's gospel Nathaniel asked the question, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”<sup>8</sup> Despite our relative obscurity, my father and I toiled away in the family business and tried our best to remain faithful to the God of our fathers.<sup>9</sup>

**2. Mary's Entrance.** As my father and I worked together, I passed the time by dreaming about my future wife. As far back as I can remember I've had a desire to get married. In my culture marriage was esteemed. Every young man wanted to get married. After all, God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone.”<sup>10</sup> I believed this with all my heart! Thus, I anticipated marriage and the privilege of providing for my future wife and children.

One day while I was minding my own business, my eyes fell upon a young girl as she carried water from the local well. Her name was Mary. Her father came to synagogue and we knew them well. Something about her that day caught my eye as never before. Maybe I was finally becoming a man. All I know is I quickly grew to love her. After a time, I asked Mary's father for her hand in marriage.<sup>11</sup> Her father graciously received me and gave me permission to be “betrothed” or “engaged” to Mary.<sup>12</sup>

To understand what happened next you have to understand our Jewish customs. In my day, betrothal was an official relationship. Betrothed couples couldn't simply break up. As far as the law was concerned we were already married.<sup>13</sup> The purpose of the betrothal was to show that the couple remained pure until they were united. If there was a violation in that period then it would take a divorce to end the betrothal.<sup>14</sup> Once the one-year betrothal period was completed, the couple was free to officially marry and was granted all the rights of a husband and wife.

Okay, enough about our Jewish customs. As I mentioned, I was betrothed to Mary (1:18). I was in love with her and very excited at the prospect of our marriage. Yet suddenly Mary left, without any notice, to go visit her cousin Elizabeth.<sup>15</sup> I wondered why she would make such sudden plans to skip town. I felt insecure and apprehensive. Why didn't she want to be with me? Mary's family said she was going to help Elizabeth with her new baby. I asked, “Is this the same Elizabeth that is older than my mother, or is there another Elizabeth in your family?” Mary's father replied, “Tis the same! It's a miracle; Elizabeth and old Zechariah are with child.”

Three months I waited for Mary to come home. It seemed like an eternity. The days passed like months. Yet, during our separation, I reflected on my perfect life. What a future Mary and I had: a home, a family, and all the things young couples dream of. Everything was perfect! I couldn't wait for Mary to return. Then one day I saw Mary from a distance. Finally my bride had returned! I was beside myself. My stomach began doing somersaults. The thrill of seeing her again was overwhelming me. So I ran with all my might to greet her. As I quickly approached her, I came to a screeching halt.

**3. Divine Dilemma.** My wonderful life just came crashing down before me. Mary was pregnant!<sup>16</sup> I didn't want to believe it, but it was as obvious as the crook of my nose. "How can this be?" I demanded. Mary quietly assured me that she had not slept with a man. She then told me a story about an angel and the Holy Spirit. Now, I ask you, seriously: Would YOU have believed her? [That's what I thought.]

Upon witnessing Mary's pregnancy, I could not see past my own pain and betrayal to the truth of her words. I experienced a flood of emotions. Initially, I was shocked. I thought that Mary was a pure and chaste girl. I couldn't believe that she had carelessly given up the precious gift of her purity. I then experienced deep sorrow. My dreams of marriage to this young girl now seemed to be forever shattered. My sorrow quickly moved to anger. I felt betrayed. My manly pride made me want to punish the man who did this to her! No one would have blamed me if I had caused a terrible scene in the village.

I left Mary's presence a ruined man. My hopes, my dreams, and my goals were all shattered. What of my reputation? Would people think I was the father? What would they say? If I told them I was not the father Mary would be taken to the city gate and stoned as an adulteress. What should I do? My mind began to race. I was having trouble thinking straight. I walked the town almost all night. I agonized over what I should do.

You see, I was called "a righteous man."<sup>17</sup> Please don't understand this to mean that I was perfect. The Bible is clear that no one is perfect.<sup>18</sup> But I was a man who was devoted to God and His standard.<sup>19</sup> I didn't eat unclean food. I didn't mix with the wrong kinds of people. I didn't keep my carpentry shop open on the Sabbath to make a few extra drachmas. I was righteous; that was my identity. Everybody knew this about me. Nobody invited me over to have ham sandwiches with tax collectors and prostitutes. I was what other people wanted to be. But now Mr. Righteous had a problem. The girl I have promised to marry is going to have a baby, and I am not the father! To make matters worse, Nazareth is a small town, and word gets around in a small town. As a general rule, everybody knows everybody's business.<sup>20</sup>

So I found myself in a quandary between conviction and compassion. I realized I had three choices concerning how to proceed. First, I could publicly expose Mary as sexually unfaithful. The Torah was clear; I needed to purge Israel of Mary's impurity. This could result in stoning,<sup>21</sup> or the shame of a public divorce.<sup>22</sup> My reputation as "righteous" was on the line. People would tell me this sin must be publicly exposed and punished. But I couldn't bring myself to do this. A second biblical option was to grant her a private divorce, in which case I needed only to hand her a written certificate in the presence of two witnesses.<sup>23</sup> My third option was to remain engaged and not divorce Mary, but this alternative appeared to require me to break the Law of Moses.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, I decided to divorce her privately. This preserved my righteousness and allowed me to demonstrate compassion.<sup>25</sup> Mary could leave Nazareth and go somewhere else to save her shame. This seemed to be the best option. I would not compromise my integrity but I could act with honor and compassion toward her, even though she had betrayed me. I faced my own emotions and courageously chose to forgive Mary. But I still had to face the society in which I lived.

**4. Divine Intervention.** I remember the night that I learned of Mary's indiscretion as if it were yesterday. It was a clear, cool night in Nazareth. My heart was broken for all the dreams that were shattered. My life that had seemed so wonderful now spiraled out of control. All my dreams lay in ruins at my feet. Or so it seemed to me. I got on my knees and cried out to God, "Why has this happened to me? How could this happen to a righteous man? What am I to do?" I sobbed uncontrollably, like a baby. Eventually I calmed down, but I still cried myself to sleep that night. As I slept I dreamed, and it seemed to me that the whole world lit up. I sat up in my bed, blinking from the brightness, to find a man standing near to my bedside. He was dressed in dazzling attire. Immediately, I knew he was an angel, sent from God to answer my prayers. I fell to the floor at his feet and bowed my head. In the midst of my angst, God sent an angel and told me that He had a special plan for me.

The angel asked me to break with tradition...to do something out of the ordinary. He spoke these words: **“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit”** (1:20).<sup>26</sup> Unbelievable! God wanted me to stay with my wife who was pregnant, even though I wasn’t even in the marriage stage of the relationship. He wanted me to stay with her, support her, and then raise her son as if he was my own. Why did the angel have to tell me, “Do not be afraid?” Naturally, I was afraid of offending God and violating the Torah, but it’s not just that. I was afraid of losing my reputation. I was afraid of what everybody would think about me. I knew there was no way people in my town were going to believe that an angel came to a poor couple in an obscure village and caused the conception of a child in the body of a virgin, teenage girl. I knew that if I married Mary my friends would never accept my account of what happened. I would not be invited to their homes, I would not be given their business, and I would never again be admired and respected as a lover of the Torah. If I committed myself to this baby—to the one who would be known as Jesus—I would do so at enormous sacrifice. My whole reputation, the work of a lifetime, would be trashed.

A thousand thoughts went through my head. And then all of a sudden it came flooding back to me: “Do not be afraid...” that’s what Mary said the angel told her.<sup>27</sup> The angel that told her she would conceive a child, even as a virgin. Yet I didn’t believe her. I didn’t listen to what she told me. Now the angel tells me the same thing! By the grace of God, I was able to believe an incredible story.

Then the angel spoke again, **“She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins”** (1:21). The name “Jesus” means “Yahweh is salvation.”<sup>28</sup> This child would be the one foretold by Isaiah, 700 years prior!<sup>29</sup> How could it be? This baby in Mary’s womb would be the Messiah? Could it be that God would entrust to me the care and responsibility of raising His Son? I wanted to say, “No, I couldn’t possibly live up to that kind of responsibility. God must have made a mistake in choosing me.” But I remembered, finally, the words of Mary: “May it be done to me according to your word.”<sup>30</sup> I awoke and I rested my future in the hands of the living God.

Upon waking from the dream, I obeyed the Lord (1:24-25). I took Mary as my wife, and she remained a virgin until a son was delivered.<sup>31</sup> That took place on a still, quiet night in the town of Bethlehem, some 80 miles from our home, but that story is for another day.

I could tell you more but Pastor Keith said you start getting restless after 12:00. So let me share with you four truths that I have learned:<sup>32</sup> **First, God is always on His throne.** Even when your life seems out of control and all your dreams are dashed, God is still on His throne. It was at the moment that I thought my future was over that God spoke to me of the plans He had for me. God wasn’t through with me and He is not through with you. I would dare say that God has a great future in store for you. He is sovereign, powerful, and dependable.

**Second, God uses ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things.**<sup>33</sup> I was an unknown carpenter from Nazareth, of all places. The Bible does not even record one word that I spoke. Yet, God used me rather powerfully. I was simply obedient to the revealed will of God, and I sought to be a godly husband and father. I’m here to tell you that God will use your life in astounding ways if you will just seek to obey Him and be faithful in the midst of your ordinary life.

**Third, God will do exactly what He says.** Seven hundred years earlier, the Lord spoke through the prophet Isaiah and said a virgin would conceive a child. You have records of this prophecy and other prophecies and the history of fulfillment. And you have other promises of the Lord. You, too, should know that the Lord will do exactly what He says. The Lord will tell us what He wants us to do. Twice during my life, the Lord spoke to me through dreams. More often, He speaks to me the same way he speaks to most of you—through His Word, through prophets, and sometimes through other believers. We must always listen and obey when we know it is the Lord who speaks to us.

***Lastly, a child was born in Bethlehem.*** I was not his father...God was His father. He was Messiah...Emmanuel...God with us. He came to save you and me from our sins, if we will only trust in Him.<sup>34</sup> The question is: Do you believe in this Christmas story? Do you believe that Jesus Christ is God's Son? Are you willing to receive God's Christmas gift of His very own Son? If you do, you need not be afraid. God is with you and He is in control. I urge you this Christmas to believe in the person and work of Christ. If you do so, I can assure you that you will not be disappointed.

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## **Scripture Reading**

Matthew 1

Matthew 2

Luke 2

Luke 3

Luke 4

1 Corinthians 1:26-31

Ephesians 5:21-33

## **Study Questions**

1. The biblical Christmas story is filled with supernatural events (Matt 1:18-25). Matthew is careful not to call Joseph the father of Jesus. He also explicitly states that Mary was a virgin. Finally, there are angelic visitations. In all honesty, are these supernatural scenarios hard for me to believe? Why or why not? Do I intellectually struggle with the ways that God has orchestrated His program? Read Isaiah 55:8-9.
2. Contrary to religious tradition, the Bible does not deify Joseph and Mary. How have I misunderstood the humanity of Jesus' earthly parents? In what ways are Joseph and Mary just like me? How can I relate to their emotional teeter-totter (e.g., fear, joy, doubt, and faith)?
3. God predicted the birth of Christ 700-800 years before Jesus' incarnation (Isaiah 7:14). Obviously, God has always had a plan for Joseph and Mary. Does God also have a plan for my life? How have I experienced the outworking of His plans and purposes?
4. Joseph and Mary believed and obeyed the revealed Word of God. Why is it difficult to take God at His Word? When have I questioned God's Word? How did God change my heart and persuade me that His Word can be trusted? What lessons did I learn from this experience?
5. In this Christmas narrative, Joseph is depicted as righteous, compassionate, and courageous. When have I exuded these characteristics? Could my life be characterized by these qualities? Why or why not? How can I begin to cultivate these character qualities?

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The name “Joseph” was a common name among Jews. Twelve men in the Bible were named Joseph. This Joseph (i.e., Mary’s husband) is mentioned only 17 times in the NT.

<sup>2</sup> Mary is identified as the mother of Jesus Christ (1:18). Joseph is not called His father. Other people sometimes called Jesus the “son of Joseph” and the genealogy in Luke 3:23 identifies Jesus “as was supposed, the son of Joseph.” Biblical writers were very careful to make it clear that Joseph was not truly the father of Jesus. Technically, Joseph adopted Jesus as his oldest son in obedience to the Lord via an angelic dream (Matt 1:20). Joseph and Mary were “betrothed” (1:18, 20, 24), a relationship regarded as the legal equivalent of marriage. In other words, betrothal could be broken only by a formal divorce. This is why Joseph is referred to as her “husband” (1:19). However, although betrothed, the relationship had not yet been consummated sexually (see 1:18, 25; also Luke 1:34). Mary’s pregnancy is explicitly and repeatedly attributed to the Holy Spirit. Matt 1:20 asserts: “that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” We read in Matt 1:16 that Mary is the one “of whom Jesus was born.” The word “whom” is feminine, thereby excluding Joseph. Note also that the repeated active verb in the genealogy, “was the father of” or “begot,” gives way to a divine passive in 1:16 (i.e., God is the active agent in the conception and birth of Jesus). Joseph is instructed to take Mary into his house and to name the child (1:20-21), thereby establishing for Joseph legal paternity. This is why the community came to believe that Joseph was Jesus’ father (Luke 2:48; Matt 13:55).

<sup>3</sup> See Matt 1:16.

<sup>4</sup> See Luke 2:4 and 2 Sam 7:12, 16.

<sup>5</sup> See Matt 13:55.

<sup>6</sup> For more on Nazareth see <http://next.bible.org/dictionaries/Nazareth>.

<sup>7</sup> Some historians believe that at the time of Jesus’ birth, the town was home to about 80 people—twelve to fifteen families, their children, animals, and the merchants who supplied services to the village. Joseph was one of the merchants.

<sup>8</sup> See John 1:46.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph passed on the carpenter trade to Jesus (Mark 6:3). The absence of Joseph in Matt 13:55 and John 2:1 suggests that he was not alive. This implies that he was likely quite a bit older than Mary. It also leads to the conclusion that Joseph was not living when Jesus began His public ministry (Luke 3:23).

<sup>10</sup> See Gen 2:18.

<sup>11</sup> Rich people arranged marriages to keep power and wealth within their families. However, since poor people possessed no wealth or power about which to be concerned they were much freer to choose for ourselves. So when a young man was somewhere between 18 and 30, he chose a wife, usually a girl between 12 and 15.

<sup>12</sup> Betrothals began after the groom or the groom’s parents had negotiated a bride price with the parents of the bride. At least some of the bride price had to be paid before the betrothal was announced. The betrothal usually lasted at least a year, sometimes considerably longer.

<sup>13</sup> In Matt 1:19, Joseph is referred to as the “husband” of Mary even though their marriage had not been consummated.

<sup>14</sup> Allen Ross, “The Birth of Jesus” (Matthew 1:18-25): [http://www.bible.org/page.php?page\\_id=3821](http://www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=3821).

<sup>15</sup> After Mary learned from the angel Gabriel that she would be the mother of Jesus, she went to visit her relative, Elizabeth, in the hill country of Judah (Luke 1:26-40). Mary remained with Elizabeth about three months before returning home (Luke 1:56). Interestingly, Matthew’s account focuses the reader’s attention on Joseph, while Luke places the spotlight on Mary. The end result is a very balanced account of our Lord’s conception and birth.

<sup>16</sup> We are unsure whether Mary informed Joseph of her pregnancy or he figured it out on his own. Carson opts for the latter. D.A. Carson, *Matthew*: EBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984, [2000]), Electronic Ed.

<sup>17</sup> See Matt 1:19. Zacharias and Elizabeth (Luke 1:6) and Simeon (Luke 2:25) were also called “righteous.”

<sup>18</sup> See Rom 3:9-10, 19; Gal 2:16; 3:10-11.

<sup>19</sup> The Hebrew word for a righteous man is *tsaddīyq*. Joseph was a *tsaddīyq*, and this means he was known for his uncompromising obedience to the Torah, the law of Moses.

<sup>20</sup> John Ortberg, “There’s Something About Joseph: What leaders can learn from the Nativity about the high cost of righteousness.” From *Leader’s Insight* at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/leaders/newsletter/2006/cln61127.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Stoning was rare in the first century. Carson, *Matthew*, Electronic Ed.

<sup>22</sup> See Deut 22:23-24.

<sup>23</sup> See Deut 24:1; cf. Num 5:11-31.

<sup>24</sup> See Lev 20:10.

<sup>25</sup> To study this further see Daniel B. Wallace, “A Mishnaic Commentary on Matthew 1.19”: [http://www.bible.org/page.php?page\\_id=1041](http://www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=1041).

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<sup>26</sup> The Scriptures offer no explanation of how this conception took place (cf. Luke 1:35). When the angel told Joseph that the child was conceived by the Holy Spirit, it is likely that Joseph would have thought of the role of the Spirit of God in creation (Gen 1:2; Ps 33:6). So the Word of God reinforced the word of the angel.

<sup>27</sup> See Luke 1:30.

<sup>28</sup> The Greek form of the name *Iesous*, which was translated into Latin as *Jesus*, is the same as the Hebrew *Yeshua* (Joshua), which means “Yahweh saves” (Yahweh is typically rendered as “Lord” in the OT). It was a fairly common name among Jews in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, as references to a number of people by this name in the LXX and Josephus indicate. See NET Study notes.

<sup>29</sup> The Hebrew word *almah* in Isa 7:14 is ambiguous, possibly allowing the translation “young woman.” However, there is no sign in a young woman having a child. Such a thing happens all the time. The sign is found when a virgin conceives and bears a Son. Moreover, the Greek word *parthenos*, which is used in Matt 1:23, plainly means “virgin.”

<sup>30</sup> See Luke 1:38.

<sup>31</sup> Joseph preserved Mary’s virginity until after the birth of Jesus. The Bible does not teach that Mary remained a perpetual virgin. The natural understanding of Matt 1:25 is that after Jesus was born, Joseph and Mary had a normal marital relationship. This is totally consistent with the information given to us later about Jesus’ brothers and sisters (Matt 12:47; 13:55-56).

<sup>32</sup> Two of these four points come from Daniel Cale, “I Joseph”:  
<http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermon.asp?SermonID=86246>.

<sup>33</sup> See 1 Cor 1:26-31.

<sup>34</sup> The single most fundamental character trait ascribed to Jesus is the power to save.