

## A Humble Beginning

**Scripture Lesson:** Matthew 1:18-25; 2:13-15

**Devotional Reading:** Hosea 11:1-4

**Background Scripture:** Matthew 1:18-2:23

**Places:** Nazareth; Bethlehem **Time:** 6 or 5 B.C.; 4 or 3 B.C.

### Matthew 1:18-25

*<sup>18</sup> This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. <sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> 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." <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: <sup>23</sup> "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us"). <sup>24</sup> When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. <sup>25</sup> But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.*

### Matthew 2:13-15

*<sup>13</sup> When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." <sup>14</sup> So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, <sup>15</sup> where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."*

## LESSON AIMS

- **Facts:** to analyze how God prepared Joseph to become the legal father of Jesus and then to prevent Jesus' death by escaping to Egypt.
- **Principle:** to make it clear that our sovereign Lord deals with human predicaments in special ways.
- **Application:** to encourage believers to trust in God's direction in unusual circumstances.

## INTRODUCTION - PROUD AS A PEACOCK

For three days in October of 1971, dignitaries feasted in Persepolis at one of the biggest parties in the history of the world. More than 60 crowned royalty and heads of state from 5 continents came to celebrate the 2,500-year history of the Persian (Achaemenian) Empire and to honor its head, the Shah of Iran. They feasted on sumptuous food and drank the world's finest wine. The cost (in 1971 dollars) was about \$100 million.

Decorating the great room were images of the peacock, the symbol of the empire. The Shah of Iran, proud as a peacock, was decked out in his finest jewels and medals. It was a grand moment for the ruler who sat on the Peacock Throne.

But “*pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall*” (Proverbs 16:18). In less than eight years the Shah would be driven into exile. About one and one-half years after that he would be dead. Looking at the banquet in retrospect, perhaps it was fitting that the main course for the final night was stuffed peacock. Earthly glory is fleeting, and God has ways of reversing people’s situations (Matthew 20:16).

## **LESSON BACKGROUND**

Jesus didn’t rule His people from an earthly Peacock Throne. He came as a baby to be placed in an animal’s feed trough; that was God’s way of preparing for the church.

God was preparing a community of faith from the very beginning. Old Testament Israel would usher in the Messiah, who would bruise the serpent’s head (Genesis 3:15) and bless “all families of the earth” (12:3). To be prepared for Messiah’s arrival, the Jewish nation was made distinct—a separate people. They were given the temple, the law, and animal sacrifices. All of this was to prepare for Christ’s coming and to encourage understanding of the need for His sacrifice on the cross.

Throughout the pages of the Old Testament, the Jews are often powerless. They endured centuries of slavery in Egypt, generations of warfare with their neighbors, and a lifetime of exile in Babylon. They were God’s chosen people, but they lived in difficult circumstances.

It was appropriate, then, that when Messiah finally came, He should be of lowly birth. His nation was being trodden under the boot of Rome, and his family was struggling with poverty. Jesus would know rejection. He fully embraced God’s community of humility; truly He was “*meek and lowly in heart*” (Matthew 11:29). He did not love the people of this community because of their great worth; rather, they had great worth because He loved them.

### **Humiliating Problem (Matthew 1:18-19)**

From the beginning of creation, the plan of God has been for one man and one woman to unite as husband and wife (Genesis 2:24). Although today’s secular world does not consider chastity to be a supreme virtue, the people of God’s Old Testament covenant did. For a woman to have a child outside of marriage is a sinful disgrace in that era. Therefore, when God sends His Son to be conceived within an unwed mother, it creates a problem!

Matthew begins his Gospel with a lengthy genealogy, tracing the ancestry of the *Christ* back to Abraham (Matthew 1:1–17). Following this genealogy, Matthew explains the unusual circumstances of *the birth of Jesus*.

It is customary for Jewish girls of the time to be *espoused*, or legally promised to be married, in their early teens. The man to whom such a girl is espoused is usually some years older, having established himself in a career. During the year-long engagement, the girl lives with her parents and has no sexual contact with the man. The betrothal or espousement is a solemn commitment. It can be broken only by death or legal divorce.

During their period of engagement, Mary and Joseph do not come *together* in sexual union. Nevertheless, Mary is *found* to be *with child*. At first the pregnancy is known only to Mary, of course. But the circumstance of her condition cannot be hidden for very long from Joseph, her parents, and the whole community of Nazareth. Mary knows that her child has been conceived through the Holy Spirit (see Luke 1:26–38), but Joseph and everyone else apparently do not.

### ***1. What unusual circumstances did Mary find herself in? (Mathew. 1:18)***

Mary certainly was placed in a situation by God that everyone in her day would misinterpret; yet she willingly submitted herself to God's plan anyway. There was even a danger (although a slight one, given Roman law) that she would be stoned to death for adultery, as nearly happened with the woman in John 8:1-11 (compare Leviticus 20:10).

Yet Mary understood that God had given her this task, and for her it was more important to obey God than to worry about the opinions of others. The apostles also understood this principle (see Acts 5:29).

### ***2. What was a time when you had to do something that other people ridiculed or otherwise "looked down on"? How did you cope with the situation in a Christian manner?***

When Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant, he knew that he was not the father of this child. The only possible assumption would be that she had been intimate with another man, thus breaking her pledge to Joseph and becoming guilty of fornication. Not only did Joseph have the right to "*divorce her quietly*" (Matt. 1:19), that is, to divorce her, but could also have had her executed as an adulteress (cf. Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:23—24).

Joseph was a noble man and did not wish to expose Mary to public disgrace or stoning. "He was a religious, good man; and therefore inclined to be merciful as God is, and to forgive as one that was forgiven (Henry). Hence, he decided to divorce her quietly, out of the public eye. Evidently, Joseph loved Mary deeply and was heartbroken at the thought of her unfaithfulness.

### ***3. What kind of man was Joseph, and what action was he planning with regard to Mary? (v. 19)***

#### **Divine Solution (Matthew 1:20–25)**

God himself has the task of reconciling justice and mercy. Justice demands that the law be fulfilled, but mercy calls for forgiveness. The primary example of justice and mercy meeting is at the cross. In the case before us, the divine solution is simply a fuller explanation of the facts, leading to Joseph's acceptance of God's plan.

Joseph was not a man who made quick decisions; otherwise, he would have immediately divorced his future bride and exposed her apparent infidelity. While contemplating what to do, he experienced a visit from a heavenly messenger. In this case, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. God often communicated through dreams (cf. Gen. 31:11, 37:5; Judg. 7:13; 1 Kings 3:5; Dan. 2:3).

The angel addressed Joseph as "son of David," a reminder that he is part of the royal lineage. Reassured that Mary's child was conceived by the Holy Spirit, Joseph was told not to be afraid to take her as his wife.

Once Joseph realized that Mary had not been unfaithful to her marital pledge, he immediately obeyed the message of the angel.

### ***4. What reassuring message did an angel deliver to Joseph? (v. 20)***

Joseph was also instructed that the child was to be given a specific name: “Jesus.” The Greek name “Jesus” is equivalent to the Hebrew name “Joshua,” meaning “the Lord saves” or “the Lord is our salvation.” This was certainly appropriate, as the mission of Christ was to “save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21).

In today’s world, Christ is viewed in a variety of ways. Some think of Him as a great teacher or as a prophet or as a philosopher. The Holy Scriptures, however, affirm that He is “the Savior of the world” (John 4:42), “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Rev. 13:8), and the One who came “to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10).

### ***5. Why was the baby to be given the name “Jesus?” (v. 21)***

Since Matthew was addressing Jews, there is an emphasis on fulfilled prophecy in his Gospel.

God does not play “catch up” with history. He does not wait to see what happens and then react. God has a master plan that has been determined from the beginning; He shapes the events of world history to bring about His will. Thus God announced through Isaiah, over 700 years in advance, that the Messiah was to be born. *All this*—the conception, the angelic announcement, the birth—is done so that His will is accomplished and His word *fulfilled*.

The original prophecy is found in Isaiah 7:14, and Jesus uniquely fulfilled this prophecy. In addition to the name *Jesus*, this boy will bear the designation “Immanuel,” literally, “God with us” (Matt. 1:23). That Christ is God in the flesh is affirmed many times in the Bible (John 1:1—3, 14; Phil. 2:5—9; Col. 2:9; Heb. 1:1—3). Christ’s teachings, miracles, and resurrection all declare Him to be “God with us.”

### ***6. How long before Christ was born did Isaiah prophesy concerning the virgin birth? (vs. 22,23)***

Certainly this word should make us realize that we are not alone! God has not left us to our own devices, devices that have failed us time and again. He sent His Son to redeem us.

We can also know that God truly identifies with us, for Jesus took the form of a man. He knew what it was to struggle with temptations. Hebrews 4:15 states that Jesus was tempted in all things like we are. He also knew what it was to suffer pain and to be betrayed, mocked, and experience death. It should bring us great joy to consider that God came to us when we could not go to Him.

### ***7. Why is the designation Immanuel (“God with us”) important to you personally?***

When *Joseph* awakens from his *sleep*, he has complete confidence that what he has experienced is a divine communication, not just an ordinary dream. He also knows that *the angel of the Lord* must be obeyed. Without further hesitation he accepts Mary as *his wife*. In the custom of the day this means that he takes her from her parents’ home to live in his own home. In the eyes of the people of Nazareth, they are husband and wife.

While some have promoted the doctrine of the so-called perpetual virginity of Mary, Matthew 2:25 indicates that after the birth of Christ, Joseph and Mary enjoyed the normal

relationship experienced by married couples. The reference to Jesus' brothers and sisters (13:55—56) also indicates that Joseph and Mary engaged in the intimacies of marriage (cf. Heb. 13:4).

### ***8. What do we know about Joseph and Mary's relationship and family life after the birth of Christ? (vs. 24,25)***

#### **Divine Protection (Matthew 2:13–15)**

God protects Joseph from making the mistake of putting away an innocent woman. In an additional act of providence, God then protects this holy family from the sinister plot of King Herod. In the first 12 verses of chapter 2, Matthew relates how wise men come from the East to see the newborn king. They follow a star westward to Jerusalem and ask, "Where is he that is born King of the Jews?" (Matthew 2:2).

They are told that Scripture says the child is to be born in Bethlehem. Before they leave for the village, King Herod tells them to be sure to come back and inform him where to find the child. After seeing Jesus and presenting gifts to Him, however, the wise men are warned by God's angel not to return and tell Herod.

There were two reasons the young family was told to flee to Egypt, one practical and one prophetic. The practical reason was to put them out of reach of Herod; the prophetic was to fulfill an ancient prediction.

As Matthew 2 opens, we are introduced to King Herod. In history, he is known as Herod the Great, and he is one of several members of the Herod family mentioned in the New Testament. A cruel despot, Herod was disturbed to learn from the wise men that the "King of the Jews" (v. 2) had been born. After all, Herod was the king of the Jews! He was also known for murdering anyone who posed a threat to him, even members of his own family.

Since the wise men did not return to Herod to inform him of the whereabouts of the child, Herod took measures to eliminate this supposed usurper to the throne by having all boys two and under slain (see Matthew 2:16).

### ***9. Why was it necessary for Joseph and Mary to flee to Egypt? (vs. 13,14)***

Just as it had been prophesied that He would lay down His life for lost sheep (Isaiah 53), so it was also foretold that He would return from Egypt (Hosea 11:1). In the original context, the Prophet Hosea was speaking of the nation of Israel in her infancy. While she was young, God called her out of Egyptian bondage.

As Messiah of Israel, the Son of God would also be called out of Egypt in the time of His infancy.

A repeated theme in these verses about the birth of Jesus is the humble and helpless circumstances of those involved. This teaches us important things about the parents, about Jesus, and about God. The parents are part of a community of humility—people who know they cannot rely on their own resources and power.

Coming to join and shape that community, Jesus shows that He intends to embrace His humanity completely. God shows that His providential care is sufficient to keep His community safe as He watches over all these events.

## ***10. Which Hebrew prophet said Christ would be called out of Egypt? (v.15)***

### **CONCLUSION**

#### **HUMILITY AS A FRUIT**

Apple trees produce apples; pear trees make pears. It is only natural that fruit trees should bear fruit. That is their design and the purpose of their creation (Genesis 1:11). If a fruit tree does not bear fruit, something is very wrong (Luke 13:9).

God's community naturally should bear the fruit of humility. Just as Jesus described himself as meek and lowly of heart (Matthew 11:29), we who follow in His footsteps should also be meek and humble. When God's Spirit lives in our hearts, it is only natural that we will produce a harvest of God-like qualities. Included in this fruit of the Spirit are "gentleness" and "meekness" (Galatians 5:22, 23). These traits should grow in the Christian heart as naturally as the flowers on the hillsides, as naturally as the fruit on healthy trees.

#### **HUMILITY AS A COMMAND**

But humility is also a command. This means we cannot take it for granted that humility will become part of our nature automatically. Paul exhorted Christians to walk "with all lowliness and meekness" (Ephesians 4:2) and "in lowliness of mind" to "esteem other[s] better than themselves" (Philippians 2:3). James admonished his readers to "humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord" (4:10). Peter commanded "be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble" (1 Peter 5:5). While humility should grow in us naturally as the fruit of the Spirit, it must also be cultivated actively in obedience to God's command.

When Jesus became a man, He humbled himself (Philippians 2:5–8), setting an example for us to follow. If we are to have the mind of Christ, we must follow Him in this attitude of humility. Only then will we properly be known as God's community of humility.

#### **PRACTICAL POINTS**

- Our salvation rests not in our own hands but in God the Son (Matthew 1:18).
- We can be sure the Lord will direct us when we seek to do what is right (vs. 19—20).
- We miss Jesus' message if we do not grasp His mission—saving people from their sin (v. 21).
- We do not know Jesus if we do not acknowledge who He is—God in the flesh (vs. 22—23).
- Obedience to God is not always easy, but it always brings joy and fulfillment (vs. 24—25).
- God uses us to fulfill His divine plan for this world (2:13—15)

**THOUGHT TO REMEMBER** - "Model humility."

#### **PRAYER**

Our Father, forgive our foolish pride. Teach us to walk humbly in Your sight. Remind us of Your providential care, so that we will not trust in ourselves. In the name of Jesus our Savior and our example, amen.