

Called Before Birth

Bible Background • MATTHEW 1:18–25

Printed Text • MATTHEW 1:18–25 | Devotional Reading • ISAIAH 42:1–9

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will REMEMBER the story of the angel’s announcement to Joseph of Jesus’ birth, REJOICE that the birth of Jesus fulfilled God’s promise to be with His people, and LIVE with greater awareness of God’s abiding presence.

In Focus

Mackinsie and Michael looked at their new baby boy in awe. They were thankful for Mackinsie’s mother being able to stay at their house with their other children, giving the parents time alone with their new youngest child. They were also thankful that Michael’s Grandmother Opal was on her way to the hospital to meet her newest great-grandbaby. Just two months ago, the family lost Grandpa Steve, Opal’s husband, the patriarch of the family. Opal was still grieving deeply, but she felt seeing this new life born so soon after the death of her Steve would be good for her soul.

Grandma Opal held the baby in her arms with practiced grace. “We wanted to tell you in person, Grandma Opal,” Michael said. “Mackinsie and I want to name him Steve, after Grandpa.”

The new baby made Grandma Opal smile. But the news of the baby’s name sprinkled tears in her eyes. “It’s good to have a new Steve in the family,” Opal said. “Look how strong that grip is! He’ll have Steve’s dedication to working hard, for sure,” Opal said. “I hope he’ll have Grandpa Steve’s sense of humor,” Michael said.

“I hope he’ll have Grandpa Steve’s dedication to the Lord,” Mackensie said. “I love that best about this family, how much you boldly show Christ to the world. Be praying for us, Grandma Opal, that we can give little Stevie as good a Christian home as Grandpa Steve gave his kids.”

What spiritual heritage did you inherit from your family?

Keep in Mind

“‘Joseph, son of David,’ the angel said, ‘do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins’” (from Matthew 1:20-21, NLT)

Words You Should Know

A. Save (Matthew 1:21) sozo (Gk.)—To provide deliverance, protection, well-being, wholeness, healing, and preservation

B. Fulfill (vv. 22) pleroo (Gk.)—To make replete, or completely full

Say It Correctly

Davidic. dah-VID-ik.

Aramite. AIR-am-ite.

KJV

Matthew 1:18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost.

19 Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privily.

20 But while he thought on these things, behold, the 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 Ghost.

21 And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.

22 Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying,

23 Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.

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

25 And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name JESUS.

NLT

Matthew 1:18 This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit.

19 Joseph, to whom she was engaged, was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly.

20 As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. "Joseph, son of David," the angel said, "do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit.

21 And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

22 All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord's message through his prophet:

23 "Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means 'God is with us.'"

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

25 But he did not have sexual relations with her until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus.

The People, Places, and Times

Prophet. The biblical prophet is a speaker for God. God communicates directly with him or her sometimes with future predictions and sometimes with commands from God. When He led the Israelites out of slavery and when He gave Moses the Ten Commandments, God spoke to Moses face to face (Exodus 33:11). God spoke frequently to His Old Testament people through the major and minor prophets (Isaiah through Malachi). God still speaks through individuals today, but not in a way that brings novel revelation because we now have the complete Word of God, the Bible, which speaks to all people everywhere.

Angels. The Greek word *aggelos* (ON-gelloce) means "messenger," and can refer to an earthly or heavenly being. Although angels have an exalted position, we are warned never to worship them (Colossians 2:18). Angels serve many functions, but their primary functions are as messengers and ministers of God to humanity (Hebrews 1:14). They bring God's specific commands (Judges 6:11-23; 13:3-5). They assist people in times of

distress (1 Kings 19:5-7) and even carry out military missions (2 Kings 19:5-7; Daniel 10:13, 21; 12:1). Jesus indicated the existence of personal guardian angels (Matthew 18:10; cf. Psalm 91:11).

Why does God communicate differently at different times, whether through prophets, angels, or His Son?

Background

The book of Matthew is called the Jewish Gospel because its intended audience is Jewish. It is rooted in Old Testament prophecy related to the coming King through the lineage of King David. The first chapter of Matthew, presents Jesus' royal lineage, describing His kingly line and rightful place as heir to David's throne. His legal inheritance comes through the line of Solomon through Joseph, Jesus' earthly father (Luke 3:23; 4:22). Jesus' lineage proves that He has the right to be called the King of the Jews.

Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, which gives Him the right to be called the Son of God (Matthew 1:18-25). He is fully God and fully human; He is the Living Word who came down from heaven, clothed in human flesh, and dwelled among people (John 1:1-4; Luke 1:26-35; 2:1-7). His virgin birth fulfilled the prophetic utterances of Isaiah (Isaiah 7:14). The sinless and divine nature of Jesus makes Him the only man capable of shedding divine blood on the Cross and becoming the final atonement for our sin.

What does it tell us about God to know that Jesus fulfilled so many prophecies?

At-A-Glance

1. Divine Conception (Matthew 1:18-19)
2. Divine Correction (vv. 20-23)
3. From Divine Clarity to Human Obedience (vv. 24-25)

In Depth

1. Divine Conception (Matthew 1:18-19)

Having laid out the historical background of the Messiah's birth, Matthew introduces an unexpected divine element. When Matthew says that "before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost," he introduces a problem to the Jewish mind—for them, the Messiah was nothing more than a human being. By stating it this way, Matthew sets the stage to argue that this human being is also God.

Joseph is described as a righteous man. Unlike the Pharisees, who insisted on a rigid reading of the law's justice, Joseph understood the compassion of the Lord. Pregnancy before the actual wedding would render Mary unfaithful. Fully applying the letter of the law, though, would lead to Mary's being stoned to death. Joseph was unwilling to expose her to the disgrace of public divorce. He, therefore, chose a quiet divorce. Thus Joseph would satisfy the requirement of the law and fulfill his sense of covenant righteousness and his compassion.

What do Joseph's actions say about him?

2. Divine Correction (vv. 20–23)

God sent an angel to Joseph in a dream to stop the divorce. The dream imparted three key things. First, Joseph was reassured that Mary had not been unfaithful (v. 20). Joseph must see this child as God’s Child, and this event as a Godevent. When God speaks into our situation, we see more clearly and our relationships are put in the right perspective. Second, Joseph was told the baby’s sex and what He was to be named. The name “Jesus” is a Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua, which means “the Lord saves.” Third, he was told the baby’s divine purpose: “he shall save his people from their sins” (v. 21).

God also clarifies the situation by pointing back to Scripture. All this can be understood by what God had already said through the prophet Isaiah. Our belief in God is not wishful thinking. Rather our faith, like Joseph’s acceptance of Mary, is grounded in prophetic insight coming directly from God.

3. From Divine Clarity to Human Obedience (vv. 24-25)

Too many of us spend time fighting with God when we should take a lesson from Joseph and stop worrying about how God guides us. God would only command us to do something consistent with His Word. After God told Joseph what to do, human opinion no longer mattered. Instead, he chose to please the One who was in charge of his life. Once God clarifies the events to Joseph and reveals that this was God’s work, Joseph married Mary and named the child Jesus as instructed.

God never makes mistakes. He didn’t pick just any virgin or any carpenter—and there were likely scores of both in Nazareth. Instead, God chose the couple who would, individually and together, place His will above all else. Their individual and collective actions made the family that paved the way for the new community that would be known as one that fosters belonging and acceptance.

Search the Scriptures

1. Where and why did the angel of the Lord appear to Joseph (Matthew 1:20)?
2. Why was Joseph instructed to name his son Jesus (v. 21)? Why is the prophesied name Emmanuel important (v. 23)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. What does it mean to be “a just man” and “son of David”?
2. Why did God reveal the truth about Mary’s miraculous conception only privately to Joseph in a dream? Why not also tell her family or the whole town?

Liberating Lesson

We never hear Joseph speak. When Joseph was disgraced and humiliated by the news of his betrothed’s pregnancy, we never hear him speak. When Joseph is told to marry the woman with whom by law he should have severed ties, we never hear him speak. When Joseph learns of Herod’s plot to kill Mary’s baby, we never hear Joseph speak. When Joseph learns about Herod’s death, we never hear him speak. When Joseph realizes that he must take his young bride and the baby Jesus to live in the despised and unimportant town of Nazareth, we never hear Joseph grumble or complain. Why? Is he not human like the rest of us? Surely he must have had strong feelings about the stress and mess of life. Whatever his feelings may have been, Matthew portrays Joseph as one who guards his tongue. Given all the pressures that crowded in upon Joseph, why do we never hear him vent his feelings? Joseph’s aim in life was obedience. The only speaking that Joseph does is through his active response to the Lord’s commands.

Application for Activation

As Joseph found, divine clarification must lead to the practical application of God’s Word. God reveals things to us so that we might act in concert with the movement of His Spirit in the world. Insights are not given to us so that we can harbor and hoard them for self-promotion, but to create within ourselves a motion to action. God can use us to unfold this divine will, just as He did with Joseph. All we need to do is listen to the Word of God.

This week, reflect on the question: How committed am I to obeying God’s Word? Pray and ask God to help you make decisions and govern your family life and relationships in ways that reflect obedience to His will. Make your speech and actions reflect your dedication to doing the will of God.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Matthew 1:18-25 18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. The beginning of this verse resumes the story announced in Matthew 1:1. Matthew’s goal here is to show the uniqueness of Jesus’ birth. We are introduced to Mary who is betrothed to Joseph. Before they are actually married and have sexual relations, Mary is pregnant by the Holy Spirit.

Matthew said Mary was “espoused” (Gk. *mnesteuo*, muh-nace-TEW-oo, “to be promised in marriage, to be betrothed”) to Joseph. This was not the same as being engaged, though it was similar. In Jesus’ day, Jewish marriage consisted of three stages. First came engagement, which was usually arranged (sometimes when the boy and girl were still children) by the parents or a marriage broker. When they were old enough to marry, a formal commitment, to which the man and woman agreed, was made. It required the confirmation of two witnesses. The betrothal agreement, the requirement of witnesses, and a betrothal period indicated intention and deliberation for marrying, not a necessity. Once the couple was betrothed or espoused, they were referred to as husband and wife—note Joseph is “her husband” and Mary is “thy wife” (vv. 19–20). After that agreement, the couple was considered married, though they did not begin living together until after a wedding ceremony: the third stage. That often came about a year later. Dissolving a betrothal required divorce, not annulment, and sexual unfaithfulness during the betrothal period was considered adultery, not promiscuity, for which the penalty was death by stoning (see Deuteronomy 22:23–24).

Mary being found pregnant before coming together with her husband could have been disastrous. No doubt such a scandal was nothing new to Matthew’s original audience, as it is not for modern readers. However, this twist is startling when presenting the story of the Messiah’s birth, seeming to imply the birth of the world’s Savior began in sin. Matthew has a further twist, however, and states that Mary’s being with child is not a result of Joseph or any other man, but the Holy Spirit. The Greek word *hagios* (HAH-gee-occe), translated as “holy,” implies that Mary’s condition of being pregnant resulted from something sacred, physically pure, morally blameless, religiously righteous, and ceremonially clean. In the Jewish context, this being could only be God.

19 Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privily.

Note here that Joseph is referred to as the husband of Mary. Even though they are not technically married yet, they are legally bound to be faithful to each other. In truth, since Mary was to be Joseph's wife, Jewish tradition demanded that she should be killed for conceiving a child by another person. But we read that Joseph is righteous (Gk. dikaios, dee-KYE-oce, "just"). It means that Joseph was equitable in character and practice. It implies that he was innocent and holy. Being "a just man" means that he lived by the laws of God. Jesus often criticized the Pharisees because though they kept the Mosaic Law technically, they often failed to obey its intention. Joseph, however, was not a legalistic Jew. He obeyed God's laws literally, but also, and just as importantly, spiritually.

Mary was pregnant. By law, he had the right to divorce her or to have her stoned to death. Yet, he decided to privately dissolve the engagement. His just nature shows not in terms of giving someone what they deserve, but connotes a sense of mercy and compassion. What made Joseph "just" was the fact that he was determined to take a different position from that of the crowd. Rather than let the sanction of the law take its course, he chose the mercy of the law. To "will" something is to be inclined or glad to do a thing. Just people do not delight or desire to see others hurt even when they are wronged.

The single Greek word translated into the phrase "make her a publick example" is paradeigmatizo (pah-rah-dage-mah-TEED-zo) means to put to open shame. When a single woman has a baby in a small town, everyone is going to know eventually. Nazareth was no different. Joseph, however, wants to avoid airing his business and seeking legal action. Therefore, he decides to divorce her "privily," that is, privately and quietly. Even though he and Mary are only engaged, breaking off that engagement is still as serious as a divorce. Jesus uses the same word that is used here, "to put her away" (Gk. apoluo, ah-po-LOO-oh) when He discusses divorce (Matthew 5:31-32, 19:7-9) We see Joseph not only as an innocent man but as a deeply religious man whose profound reflection on divine things led him to act in ways that set him apart from his generation.

20 But while he thought on these things, behold, the 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 Ghost.

We find a divine messenger bringing tidings to many of God's people in times of confusion. In Joseph's confusion, he went into contemplation, and in the middle of his contemplation, a heavenly messenger was sent (cf. Acts 10:19). This messenger is meant to lead him into the proper actions. God sent this messenger to bring clarity and drive the confusion away. The angel addresses Joseph by name and calls him "son of David." This was to remind Joseph of who he really is. Joseph's connection with David immediately reminds him of the covenant promise given to his ancestor David regarding the coming Messiah. Since the Gospel of Matthew was addressed primarily to Christians from a Jewish background, Joseph's Davidic ancestry needed to be clearly shown.

With this familiar and covenant frame of mind, the angel then addresses the issue at hand. The angel speaks to the psychological situation of fear that was keeping Joseph from doing what he knows to be right. In addressing the present situation, the angel did not avoid the fact that Mary was pregnant but assured Joseph that the child was one of divinity.

21 And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.

In this verse, the angel announces to Joseph that the child is to be named Jesus. After having an angel put his life in historical perspective and explain what was going on in the present, Joseph was probably left with the question: What is the purpose of all this? First, the angel dealt with the immediate future—the child will be a son. Second, the child shall be named Jesus. Jesus (Gk. Iesous, YEAH-soos) is the Greek form of Joshua (Heb. Yehoshua, ye-ho-SHOO-ah), which means "Yahweh is salvation." This probably reminded Joseph of the great warrior conqueror who delivered the Children of Israel from their enemies by the power of God. Finally, the

angel connects the name of the child with the future act of the child, “he shall save his people from their sins.” Jesus was an often-used name for boys then, so Jesus’ name not only communicated God’s spiritual purpose for Him but at the same time identified Him with the sinful humanity that needed God’s forgiveness. God sent Jesus to earth and, in obedience, Jesus came to fulfill His name.

Even though the modern Christian quickly thinks of eternal salvation as the word “save” (Gk. sozo, SOAD-zo), the use of the word here addresses the salvific view of the people of the Jews. Living amid oppression, Joseph would have understood this term in relation to deliverance and protection. The term “save” also implies healing and preservation. In this period of Israel’s oppression, this term also spoke to their need for well-being and wholeness. Many Jews wanted, and most expected, a Messiah who would set them free politically from Roman domination to become a powerful nation again. What made Jesus unique and brought about His rejection was that God’s purpose for Him was to set people free spiritually from domination by sin.

22 Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying,

Here again, we see Matthew’s deep entrenchment in Israel’s prophetic tradition as he points us back to the Old Testament. Matthew insists throughout his Gospel that Jesus is the Messiah because He fulfills all the prophecies in astonishing ways. He tells us that everything that is happening here has been spoken by the prophets. This sets the coming of Jesus in a larger context. It was not a circumstance of luck or human will. Jesus’ birth was the fulfillment of the divine purpose, a long process of development, the continuity within history. “That it might be fulfilled” is a common refrain throughout Matthew’s Gospel (see 4:14; 8:17; 12:17).

Isaiah prophesied in a message to King Ahaz about a coming birth and the salvation of God’s people (Isaiah 7:10-16). A key term here is “fulfill” (Gk. pleroo, play-ROW-oh), which means to make replete, to make completely full. Thus, this experience furnishes Joseph with an explanation of the text in the Old Testament. In a sense, God inspired the word of the prophet with meaning for the reader. It also means that what has been promised is now being executed.

23 Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.

God’s revelation of His divine plan for us is amazing here. Isaiah and Matthew understand the fulfillment of this prophecy differently. When Isaiah first spoke those words to King Ahaz, he did not realize it was a messianic prophecy. At that time, Isaiah saw the Israelite and Aramite armies joining to fight the nation of Judah and spoke God’s words to the king: before a young woman could conceive and give birth, it would be obvious that God was with His people. Before the child would learn right from wrong, the land would be even more prosperous than before (Isaiah 7:14-17).

The Hebrew word Isaiah used here is ‘almah (AL-maw) which refers to a young female. At this stage of life, a woman would be ready for marriage or just married. In biblical times, females married at a very early age and the bride was expected to be a virgin. The word’s meaning emphasizes the woman’s youth, though she is also understood to be virginal. When the Old Testament was translated into Greek, the word used here was parthenos (PAR-theh-noce). This is the word used for the equivalent stage of life, but the idea of virginity comes more to the fore.

The name Emmanuel explains the nature of the child who is to be born. Emmanuel is the combination of im (Heb. EEM), which means with; a suffix meaning us (-nu, NEW); and the word el (Heb. ELL), which means God. Isaiah spoke of how God’s blessings would reveal Him to be the “With-us God,” but Matthew shows his audience that Jesus is the incarnate “With-us God.”

By referencing this prophecy, Matthew shines a spotlight on an amazing revelation from God. Isaiah saw his prophecy come true. In less than a year (time for a maiden to marry, to conceive, bear, and name her child), Judah was indeed delivered from the army’s threat. But then the Greek translation of Isaiah’s words brought out

a further understanding. This is what Matthew highlights as he reports Christ's birth. More than just a young girl having a baby, a young girl who had never even had sexual relations would have a baby. More than just feeling God's presence in His blessings on His people, God's people would truly, physically experience His presence. God had already kept His word to Isaiah. With the birth of the Messiah, He keeps His word again. This time its fulfillment abundantly overflows to an extent that few had hoped for.

24 Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife: 25 And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name JESUS.

When Joseph awakens from this dream, he immediately goes about obeying its message. Joseph agreed to the solution that the angel had proposed. It also implies that Joseph committed himself to continue to exercise himself fully in the Word of God revealed to him. What God had ordained was now going to be his purpose. His reason for rising up was not to transgress the law but to live out the revelation.

When Matthew said Joseph "took" Mary as his wife, that simple word says so much. First, it means he accepted her as his wife. Second, he abandoned any suspicion about infidelity by Mary. Third, although the Scripture gives no specifics, Joseph likely went ahead with the wedding and the Jewish traditions that went with beginning a marriage. Fourth—and most important—he became indispensable in preparing for the Savior's life during Mary's pregnancy.

The phrase "knew her not" means that Joseph had absolutely no sexual relationship with her. The next word "till" suggests that Joseph continued in a state of abstinence until or for as long as Mary was pregnant. After Jesus was born, Joseph and Mary would live together as husband and wife for many years and have several of their own children. However, Joseph wants there to be no mistake, no reason to suspect that Jesus was his biological son. He knows the Child is destined for a holy task and he is dedicated to doing all he can to help Him along the way.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Sign of God's Presence
(Isaiah 7:10–15)

TUESDAY

Called a Light of the Nations
(Isaiah 42:1–9)

WEDNESDAY

Called to Mission Before Birth
(Isaiah 49:1–7)

THURSDAY

Birth of Jesus Foretold to Mary
(Luke 1:26–38)

FRIDAY

Simeon Foretells Jesus' Ministry
(Luke 2:34–38)

SATURDAY

Mary, in the Lineage of Ruth
(Ruth 4:9–17)

SUNDAY

Miracle of the Holy Spirit Conception
(Matthew 1:18–25)