



Matthew 1:18-25

“Portrait Of A Good Man”

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Pastor Phil Thrailkill
Main Street UMC
211 North Main St.
Greenwood, SC 29646

Church Office: 864-229-7551
Church Website with sermon manuscripts: www.msumc1.org
Email: PThrailkil@aol.com

“Following Christ from City Center”

IA: MATTHEW 1:18-25 "PORTRAIT OF A GOOD MAN"

Discontinuity(Mary) Within Continuity(Joseph)

N.D. 1) vv.18-19 NARRATIVE: BETROTHED MARY AND JOSEPH NEARLY DIVORCED.

Question Of 1:16 = Is Joseph Jesus' Father? Does Genealogy Matter?

18 Now, as for **JESUS** the Christ (i.e. Messiah), *Messiah* 5x (1:1, 16-17[2x], 18, 2:4) Oddity Of 1:16, //1:1
his origin (Gk. *genesis*) took place this way: **1:1 (genesis), How Was Jesus Adopted Into Davidic Lineage? Who & How, Stage 1: Promised To One Another By Families**

- a When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph **NAME/ MARITAL STATE (Stage 2) (1)**
- b but **BEFORE THEY CAME TOGETHER**, **No Mistake, Stage 3, HER CHARACTER (2)**
- c she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit. **Confirms Divine Sonship, PREDICAMENT (3)**

Has Info He Does Not! God Not Ask Joseph's Permission!

- 19 a And her husband **JOSEPH**, **Disappears After 13:55, NAME/MARITAL STATE (1')**
- b being a righteous (just) man, **Lk. 1:6, Deut. 22:13-19(offered self), 23-24(seduced), 25-27(raped)**
- but unwilling to put her to shame, **9:13, 22:39-40, MERCY: HIS CHARACTER (2')**
- c resolved to divorce her quietly (privately). **m. *Sot.* 1, 5 PREDICAMENT RESOLVED (3')**

Less-Harsh Option, No Formal Inquiry, Inform Father, Lose Bride Price

2) vv.20-21 DIRECT DISCOURSE: ANGEL APPEARS TO JOSEPH: PSALM 130:8.

Trinitarian Revelation By Angel In A Dream, New Information

20 But as he considered this, **Birth/Naming, Gen. 16:11-17, 17:15-22, I Chron. 22:9-10, I Kgs. 13:2, Is. 7:14-17**
1/4 Dreams To Joseph (2:12, 13, 19, 22), O.T. Dreamer Joseph, Gen. 39-41

- a) **behold**, **There Is No Scandal For Joseph To Fear, BEHOLD(1)**
an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream saying, **Ex. 3:1-2, ANGELOPHANY (2)**
"Joseph, *son of David*, **1:1, 6(2x), Like Solomon, PERSONAL ADDRESS, LINEAGE (3)**

Angel Explains Work Of Trinity: Spirit, Son, Lord

- b) do not fear to take Mary *your wife*, **Lk. 1:35, Fulfill Stage 3, COMMAND 1 (4a)**
for that which is **conceived** in her is of the Holy Spirit; **v.18 God's Act, Is. 61:1, REASON 1 (4b)**

For Joseph To Name Gives Legal Status

- 21 c) and she will **bear a son**, **Common Name = Clue To His Mission**
and *you* shall **call his name Jesus** ("Yahweh helps/ saves"), **Jeshua, COMMAND 2 (5a)**
for 'he will save his people from their sins'" (Ps. 130:8). **Heb. 4:15, REASON 2 (5b)**

Not Militaristic/National Salvation, //26:28

D.D. 2') vv.22-23 DIRECT DISCOURSE: ISAIAH 7:14 (LXX).

Echoes vv.20-21

God Speaks = Written Revelation In Scripture Confirms Plan

22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord has spoken by the prophet: **Scriptural Assurance For Dream**
1/12 Formula Citations Of O.T., Demonstrates Continuity

- 23 a) "**Behold**, **Virgin Will 1) Conceive and 2) Bear**
Answers Question Of 21:45-46, David's Lord? David's Son?
b) a virgin shall **conceive** **To The House Of David, LXX Parthenos = Virgin**

To King Ahaz, Hebrew *Alma*, Not *Betulah* = Young Marriageable Women

- c) and **bear a son**, **Salvation Not From Human Potential: Grace**
and **his name shall be called Emmanuel**" ("God with us"). **Is. 8:10, 9:6, Mt. 28:20**

Throne Name, More Than Jewish Messiah, They Will Call...

N.D. 1')vv.24-25 NARRATIVE: MARY AND JOSEPH COMPLETE MARRIAGE RITUAL.

Focus Not On Birth But Naming, Davidic Son Despite Virginal Conception

24 When **JOSEPH** awoke from sleep, **Never Hear His Voice! Awoke With New Information In A New World!**
he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; **OBEEDIENCE TO REVELATION (6)**

- 25 he took his wife, **Obeys v.20b, Villages Assumes He Is Father, Bore The Shame**

but **KNEW HER NOT** *until** (*heos*) she had borne a son; **Obeys v.23c, Gen. 4:1, Euphemism For Sex**

and he called his name **JESUS**. **Focus = Legal Father, Obeys v.21b, Circumcised Day 8, 12:46-50, 13:55**

No Bethlehem Trip, Manger, Angels Rejoicing, Shepherds, Swaddling Clothes As Lk.

Dual Paternity: Son of God/ David, Royalty From Mother's Husband

Point = Son Of David In Spirit Of Virginal Conception, Charge Of Illegitimacy Followed Jesus, Jn. 8:39-41

Legal Naming, m. B. Bat. 8:6, "If a man said, 'This is my son,' he may be believed."

***Roman Catholics and Protestants disagree on the adverb *until* in v. 24. Catholics read it through the lens of their doctrine to mean Mary is perpetually a virgin (before, during, after birth) and had no children after Jesus. Thus the *old Joseph* in some art and nativity sets (too old to be interested!) This is a non-biblical legend popularized in the late 2nd century through the non-canonical *Infancy Gospel Of James* (19:3). The implication of v. 24 and 13:55-56 (a list of siblings) is that Joseph sired children after Jesus (Irenaeus *Haer.*, 3.16.21-22). Virginity is a virtue before marriage, not after. One-flesh union is constitutive of marriage. Mary was both mother of Jesus and wife of Joseph, a model disciple and spouse. Faithfulness to both is possible.**

A Brief Treatment Of Matthew 1:18-25

In this thought unit Matthew answers a question raised by the genealogy of 1:1-17, Why is Joseph not listed as Jesus’ father with the usual *begat*? And, Why is Joseph introduced as “the husband of Mary, *of whom was born* Jesus who is called Christ?” Because Joseph is not Jesus’ bio-dad since the origin of Mary the virgin’s conception was not biological but theological, i.e by the Holy Spirit. Joseph officially adopted Jesus at his naming as the angel said it should be. Thus, Joseph’s lineage now belongs to Jesus as part of his Messianic credentials. When you add up Jewish history as exemplified in Matthew’s genealogy, it all points to Jesus as its meaning; his descendants are his followers (7th generation), not physical offspring.

The surface structure of the unit is a 4:2 concentric pattern (1-2-2'-1') or chiasm. Multiple inclusions mark the beginning and end of the thought unit: *Jesus* (v.18a) // *Jesus* (v.25b), *before they came together* (v.18b) // *knew her not* (v.25b), *Joseph* (v.19a) // *Joseph* (v.24a). The outside frames (1. vv.18-19 // 1' vv.24-25) are narrative discourse (N.D.) while the two central components (2. vv.20-21 // 2' vv.22-23) are direct discourse (D.D.) in which two speeches are given: 1) vv.20-21 = angel of the Lord to Joseph, and 2) vv.22-23 = the words of the Isaiah 7:14. Note that the angel’s speech conforms to the three-part outline of the Isaiah quote: a) *behold*, b) *conceive*, c) *bear and name*. The six parts of the angelophany of vv.20-21 (Behold, angelic appearance, personal address, command 1/reason 1, command 2/reason 2, obedience) are shaped to match the form of the Isaiah quote. Thus, special revelation in an angel confirms and fulfills scriptural revelation in the prophet. There is continuity in God’s new work for his people.

Matthew’s opening in v. 18 is formal and echoes 1:1 of the genealogy, “Now as for Jesus the Messiah, his origin (Gk. *genesis*) took place this way.” Next is the introduction of Jesus’ parents. Their treatments are parallel in three parts: a) name and marital state, b) character analysis, c) statement of predicament. Mary is between stages two and three of marriage, has not had sex with Joseph, and is pregnant. Joseph her husband is righteous and has made the merciful decision not to shame her publicly but divorce her privately, thus forfeiting the bride price. The situation is intolerable. What will they do?

Like his Old Testament namesake, Joseph receives divine revelation in dreams, four of them (1:20, 2:12, 13, 19). An angelophany (vv.20-21, 24) in six parts announces a providential birth based on Old Testament models (e.g. Gen. 16:11-17, 17:15-22). Joseph is addressed in terms of his ancestry as *son of David* and commanded not to fear the scandal of marriage to Mary, the reason being that the child is the creative act of God through the Holy Spirit, understood as a non-sexual begetting in contrast to Greco-Roman mythologies of the coupling of a male deity and a human female. The child is a male; Joseph is to name him a common name with a theological meaning echoed in Psalm 130:8, “for he will save his people from their sins,” both the penalty of sin and its power. Jesus is not nationalistic in the partisan sense.

The next section (2' vv.22-23) confirms that the angelic revelation is grounded in holy writ and thus demonstrative of consistent divine purpose. What Isaiah promised long ago, that besieged King Ahaz of Judah would see a child born to a marriageable young woman (Heb. *almah*) as a sign God was with them and would prevail over Israel and Syria, is brought to full reach in a more-miraculous birth to the virginal Mary, a child who is not symbolically but literally *God with us*. The Joseph whose voice is never heard is immediately obedient after waking. Because Isaiah stated the virgin would *conceive and bear*, Joseph did not begin marital relations till after the birth. Jesus was adopted and named at his circumcision.

PORTRAIT OF A GOOD MAN

“Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife....”

Angelic divorce prevention.

M A T T H E W 1 : 2 0

Joe Torre was a catcher and then broadcaster for the St. Louis Cardinals. When named manager of the Yankees, announcer Phil Rizzuto suggested to Torre that managing could be done better from on high in the broadcast booth.

Torre replied, "Upstairs, you can't look in their eyes."¹

In Jesus, God chose to leave the broadcast booth and come down on the field to play the game at our level. In his eyes we see God looking back at us. Anything less is not full-blooded, classic Christianity which offers a real incarnation, God assuming flesh: truly God, truly man, fully available, fully killable!²

In the movie *Jurassic Park* there's a moment when the paleontologist Allen Grant suddenly comes face-to-face with the dinosaurs he'd recreated. He falls to the ground, dumbstruck. It's one thing to piece together an image of ancient creatures by picking through fossils, but to encounter an extinct dinosaur- now that's something else.³ Face-to-face is no longer theoretical. In Jesus we meet God. Hello?

¹ PreachingToday.com search under *incarnation*.

² The U.M. Church has a robust doctrinal statement on the incarnation and its intention: "Article II - Of the Word, or Son of God, Who Was Made Very Man: 'The Son, who is the Word of the Father, the very and eternal God, of one substance with the Father, took man's nature in the womb of the blessed Virgin; so that two whole and perfect natures, that is to say, the Godhead and Manhood, were joined together in one person, never to be divided; whereof is one Christ, very God and very Man, who truly suffered, was crucified, dead, and buried, to reconcile his Father to us, and to be a sacrifice, not only for original guilt, but also for actual sins of men'" (*The Book of Discipline 2012*: 64).

³ PreachingToday.com search under *incarnation*.

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It took the church a long time to find language to describe the depth and fullness of just who Jesus was, but in Matthew we have a good start. Jesus has a unique dual origin: he is *of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary*. He has a special mission: *to save his people from their sins*. He has credentials as the fulfiller of Scripture: *all this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet Isaiah*. He is the one of whom angels speak. He has an ordinary name with special significance, *Joshua* or *Jesus*- which means *Yahweh saves*. In him, as nowhere else, we meet *Emmanuel*, God with us.⁴ Now it will take the church three centuries to come to the precise definitions of the Nicene Creed to rule out misunderstandings, but the raw assertions are all here in Matthew.⁵ Jesus is *through* a woman, but not *from* a man. He bring Scripture to fulfillment. In him God is with us as Son and personal agent to remove the ancient curse of death and the systemic disease of sin and long blockage of ignorance and the cruel bondage of evil so as to heal our relationship with God and one another. In Jesus we are embraced and restored and given a future within the force field of God’s holy love. Jesus enables a new friendship.

The teaching of the Incarnation- that God the Son assumed full humanity in Jesus without ceasing to be God- is dear Christian teaching. God built a bridge to us in this Jewish baby. God says a big Yes to all our specificities: location, language, gender, ethnic history, bodily limits, and finally death. But there are two critical differences between us and Jesus: 1) He has two natures; we have only one- a human nature, now fallen and *out of sorts*; 2) Jesus is not infected with the ancient impulses of distrust towards God and disobedience, the condition we label *sin* which serves as a perpetual opening to *evil* which is always anti-God and anti-human.⁶ We are all both alienated and highly vulnerable with a real foe and little defenses. But Jesus comes with God’s resources inbuilt, and he does not share our deadly disease or our tendency to wink at evil. How smart of God to deliver such a compact package.

Come to think of it, since male and female are the two human models, the

⁴ For an analysis of ancient pagan parallels to Matthew 1:18-25 and their function, see Charles Talbert, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010), “Miraculous Conceptions and Births,” 40-48; for a defense of the historicity of the virginal conception, see Ben Witherington, *Matthew* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2006), 51-53.

⁵ See Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2004).

⁶ For a profane restatement of the impact of sin, see Francis Spufford, *Unapologetic* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2012), Chap. 2, “The Crack In Everything,” 24-53.

Savior had to be a male for both sexes to be included. Only women bear children; a Mother Mary and a Savior daughter would embrace only females, but a mother and son embrace both genders. In the logic of incarnation, a second male- namely Joseph, is unnecessary in the strict sense. The genders of male and female are honored in God the Son assuming flesh, but they are not the cause. Joseph does not *beget* Jesus in the same manner his father Jacob *begat* him.⁷ Mary is receptive; the child is conceived by the creative action of God through the Holy Spirit, and here the Spirit is not a male partner.⁸ The conception is creative but not sexual. Jesus is not the result of human initiative. *He is not our idea; we cannot claim credit.* He is the coming of God into the world, and it's a surprise, even if hints are found in the Old Testament and pagan myths. Joseph and Mary participate, even cooperate with the Almighty, but in the strictest sense they do not create Jesus. His source is God, his parents *Mary and Joseph*.⁹ Humanity is embraced, but our tendency to pride and credit-taking is excluded. Salvation is not human potential written in capital letters. Jesus did not evolve out of humanity. He is not our gift to God but God's gift to us.

TURNING TO THE TEXT

The Predicament of a Young Couple (1:18-19)

If Matthew has been from the streets, his story might have sounded like this:

“My name is Matt, and I am yo’ storyteller today. Now ‘bout that boy Jesus, let me tell ya’ll how it happened cause I got the inside line. His young momma Mary was in a heap o’ trouble, bein’ *in the family way* befo’ the weddin’ day. But God fixed her man Joe with a dream one

⁷ 1:16 is the last of the long, active voice series of *begats*, which prepares for the surprise of a shift to the passive in 1:17, “Joseph, the husband of Mary, *of whom was born* Jesus.....” 1:18-25 answers the question, How does Joseph’s lineage apply to Jesus?

⁸ Ben Witherington writes, “... no mating is described or hinted at in either Matthew or Luke’s account. Nothing is said about God coming down in the guise of a human and coupling with Mary. The story is of a miraculous conception without the aid of any human being, without any form of intercourse, a miracle that happens to Mary through the agency of the Holy Spirit” (*Matthew*, 52).

⁹ For a summary of classic church teaching on the incarnation, see Thomas Oden, *The Word of Life* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1989), 93-196.

night so he knows mo ‘bout what’s goin’ on than anyone cept’ Mary. He says OK to God after a sho-nuff strange dream. A good man he was, reasonable sort of fella and kind to boot. So they was married, her with a stretch panel in the front. Why Joe, he even named the boy *Jeshua ben Joseph*, Jesus: Joseph’s boy. Everyone in Nazareth knowed somethin’ funny was up, even if they was ignorant of all the family particulars.”

A wedding gown with a stretch panel is always good for a wink and laugh, and that’s precisely what God arranges for two Jewish young people pledged to each other by their parents. First century Jews, concerned as they were with the preservation of their faith and nation, knew what we’ve forgotten- that marriage is too important to be left to the emotional whims of the young. Wisdom is called for. We think romance and love are prerequisites; they hoped it came later. They had *arranged* marriages. You may not know it but Lori and I had an arranged marriage. Yep, she and her momma arranged it, and her daddy arranged to pay for it! I was a prop.

The elegant genealogy which opens Matthew leaves us with a question. At the end of nineteen hundred years of fathering sons starting with Abraham, the pattern changes, “...and Jacob begat Joseph, the husband of Mary, *of whom* Jesus was born, who is called Christ.”¹⁰ No *begat* for Joseph to Jesus, and a curious *of whom* for Mary. The shift is from active to passive voice, from something someone did to something that happened to them. The question is this: Is Joseph the father of Jesus, or is he not? Matthew whets our curiosity and then gives us an explanatory footnote in verses 18 through 25, “Now, as for Jesus Christ, *his origin* took place this way....” Matthew is balanced in his presentation; he first gives a description of Mary in verse 18, then Joseph in verse 19, each in three parts: 1) proper name, 2) a word about their character, and finally 3) their predicament. Marriage in those days was complicated. Two sets of Jewish parents promised their children in marriage.¹¹ Stage one. Later on, but no earlier than thirteen for males and twelve for females, there was the formal betrothal which took place in the home of the bride’s father. No such thing as teenagers in those days; you went from child to adult shortly after sexual maturity. The betrothal was stage two, and it was the time to haggle in near-Eastern fashion over the marriage contract and the bride-price or dowry which the woman kept as

¹⁰ 1:16.

¹¹ Robert Obach and Albert Kirk, *A Commentary on The Gospel of Matthew* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 10.

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security in case of divorce. At that point couples became legally husband and wife; to break a marriage after betrothal required divorce. A young woman might remain in her father's house for a year or more before the formal wedding and consummation of the relationship, stage three. Marriage was too important to rush into. A Jewish girl between her betrothal and wedding might end up being a *virginal widow* if her husband died in the interim.¹² To us it's a contradiction, but not to them.

Matthew is precise. Mary and Joseph are between stages two and three: post-betrothal but pre-marriage. Legal but not yet intimate, as verse 18 makes clear, "When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, *but before they came together...*" God's timing was strategic. The structure of a legal marriage in place but Mary still a virgin. If there's a child on the way and Joseph's knows it's not his, there's only one other option- another man. The results are noted in an understated manner, "...she *was found* to be with child of the Holy Spirit."

This is not God as a substitute male. The conception of Jesus is not sexual but a creative act of God. In Hebrew *Holy Spirit* is grammatically feminine and neuter in Greek. Jesus is not a chimera, half God, half human. Church teaching is that he is fully God and fully human, two natures in one person. Karl Barth has written, "Either Jesus Christ was actually God, or we do not have a full revelation yet."

There is continuity here; a woman carries a child in her womb. But there is discontinuity; he did not arrive in the usual means. Everyone knows where babies come from; Mary's in trouble; no one believes her. Being chosen by God does not protect your reputation. You may know what cannot be explained. Knowing God's secrets often leads to misunderstanding, even rejection, in this case from a husband. There are some circumstances in life only God can get you into, and only God can get you out of. Doing business with God is not safe. Mary's character is in tact but not her reputation. God is messin' with the lives of two young people, and not solving the problems all at once. Mary's about to learn that God is trustworthy with the most important human relationship in life. The God who has worked with her will also work in Joseph. They will be in this together to provide a home and heritage for Jesus. No one else will understand, and the shadow of illegitimacy stuck with Jesus.¹³

¹² Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991, 36-37.

¹³ John 8:41.

I want pause here and put in a good word for pre-marital chastity since it's such a neglected and even mocked virtue in our day. The best training for marriage is a deep conviction of your own high worth and a refusal to settle for anything less than a wedding band. Marriages fail at a high rate, not because of lack of intimate technique but for a lack of character and self-control. Cohabitation, what many call *trial marriage*, is actually *trial divorce*. Here is the sociology: "Out of 100 couples who live together without marriage: 40 will break up before marriage; 60 will marry, 45 of whom will divorce before ten years for a 75% failure rate; only 15 are still together after ten years, and eventually some of those will divorce."¹⁴ So when he church says wait, the data's on our side. Does this means all marriages preceded by cohabitation are doomed? No, not if Christ is placed the center and the virtue of self-control recovered, but it does mean these relationships are much more vulnerable because of shaky foundations. Forgiveness and healing and hope and wisdom are always available at our corner store. The church specializes in rehab.

As popular as it is, sexual immorality is against church teaching because it uses rather than values people.¹⁵ The commitment of our bodies requires the commitment of our lives. You don't test drive people like cars. You don't practice commitment with lack of commitment. If you are a teenager, young adult, or mature adult, recognize that chastity shows self-respect, other-respect and respect for the way God wired us in heart and body. And if you are not chaste, seek God's forgiveness and then commit to practice God's wisdom. It's good for you because it guards your heart. Trust God with your desire for romance and intimacy. Make yourself accountable to a Christian friend. And whenever you commit body, understand that you also commit heart and soul, the whole self. A permanent bond is formed that will either be forever enjoyed in marriage or forever endured as a piece of your heart is given away. We cannot segment ourselves. If you do not practice the virtue of self-control outside marriage, what makes you think you can practice it within marriage? An appetite for variety, once nurtured, does not automatically vanish with marriage.

¹⁴ Mike McManus, *Marriage Savers Congregational Manual*, 84. For a recent summary of research, see Mike & Harriet McManus, *Living Together: Myths, Risks & Rewards* (New York, NY: Howard, 2008); Glenn T. Stanton, *The Ring Makes All The Difference* (Chicago, ILL: Moody, 2011).

¹⁵ "Although all persons are sexual beings whether or not they are married, sexual relations are only affirmed only with the covenant of monogamous, heterosexual marriage" (*BOD 2012*, 110). Our first chargeable offense remains *immorality* (776-777).

Living together is no substitute for the public, legal and church-blessed institution of marriage. Many women see it as the first step towards a marriage, “If I live with him, maybe he will love and marry me.” Wrong! Many see it as a sophisticated, liberating alternative. But at its foundation is mistrust; the back door’s left open.

Not long ago I counseled a woman who dreamed of marriage and was abandoned by her live-in, not the first. We had a talk about self-respect and not putting a low price tag on herself. Many men think, “Great, all the privileges, none of the responsibilities. Trade her in if I find a better deal.” Since society laughs at what the church teaches, only the most committed will choose to keep our wisdom. In our day the single chaste person is a modern martyr of sorts. Welcome a single adult into the circle of your family; they need the encouragement, and many are painfully lonely. Some have sampled the college hook-up culture and the meat market of the bars and need a place to heal.

A parallel account of Joseph is given in verse 19. He is called *her husband* because of betrothal. But it is his convictions that most interest me. Joseph is a *righteous man*, committed to obeying God’s Word, and the law says a woman who cheats after the betrothal is guilty of adultery. Based on available evidence, Joseph makes a decision. No public trial, no added humiliation; he will divorce her quietly. By doing so he forfeits the dowry he’s already paid.¹⁶ It stays with Mary and her father. It costs him dearly; his family saved for this marriage. No vengeance in him, just sadness and disappointment that their future has been foreclosed by her behavior.

What kind of man is this Joseph? One who obeys God’s written will in Scripture and blends it with mercy and kindness. He loses money to guard what he can of Mary’s reputation. Joseph is moral but not rigid. He is tough *and* tender. He is two things that men desperately need in our day: obedient to God’s written word and considerate of others. God has intruded, and pain is all around. Mary is slandered; Joseph is acting rightly on insufficient evidence; parents are disappointed; money is lost; Nazareth is full of gossip; legal mechanisms are coming into play; an impending divorce looms. Matthew packs a lot of drama into two verses. Two good Jewish village kids, Mary and Joseph, known each other all their lives, their futures all planned, are in a mess. There is *no way* out unless God opens up a *new way* forward, because it is God who is the source of the pain and confusion.

¹⁶ David Garland, *Matthew* (New York, NY: Crossroads, 1994), 22.

New Evidence Through Personal Revelation (1:20-21).

“But as he considered this....” Joseph was not only a just and kind man but patient. The decision has been made, but the turmoil is still with him. He decided to sleep on the matter. Joseph’s virtues are beginning to pile up. I like this young man.

When the church speaks about how God is revealed, we tend to use three categories based on the perceived intensity of the revelation. There is first *general revelation* given in the natural world and in human conscience. We know something of God through the majesty of nature and the whisperings of conscience. Then there is *special revelation* enshrined in the Bible. We gain new information about God through his workings with the Jews and in Jesus. In the first we know *of* God’s existence, and in the second *about* God’s character through God’s behavior. But there’s a third category, what is called *personal revelation*, and here God speaks through more direct means, in this case in dream through an angel. Other means are visions, prophecies, answers to prayer, and other types of miracles- which, when surveys are done- are still common. The God who was *out there* in nature and *back there* in history moves in close enough to be heard and felt. In general revelation God says *my world*, in special revelation *my people*, and in personal revelation *Hey You!*

This means our friend Joseph is a charismatic, open to vivid religious experience as the invisible world intrudes into this one.¹⁷ But so is Mary; she’s also a *charismatic*, having had a creative encounter with the Spirit. This couple is bound by something deeper than feelings or the marriage traditions of their community. Their marriage is called into cooperation with the Holy Trinity. The angel of the Lord cues Joseph that the child in Mary’s womb is there by the Holy Spirit and that he is not to fear but take Mary and the child and to formally adopt the newborn into his family ancestry, thus making him officially *a son of David*. Providence has found two willing co-conspirators.

God has no trouble at all making his will known; finding participants, however, is sometimes a challenge. Who will surrender their life? Mary. Who will obey God at great cost? Joseph. Who will do business with God? Both. What many marriages need to break the stale pattern of boredom is a new openness to the work of God!

¹⁷ For a recent spin on such experience, see Ken Wilson, *JESUS BRAND SPIRITUALITY* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 2008), Chapter 5, “Mystically Wired,” 89-106.

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Notice that God did not speak to Mary and Joseph at the same time; there was an awkward interim, and God did not deal with them the same way. For Mary it was an encounter with the Spirit of God, and for Joseph an angel both seen and heard in a dream and then echoed in Isaiah's prophetic promise. This is why couples have to be patient with and respectful of each other's spiritual paths; they are as different as our fingerprints and as richly complimentary as our genders.

Lori and I don't relate to God the same way. I have to study everything; she intuitively know what to do. I am the more adventuresome one; she is stable and steady. She finds God in people; I find God in the Bible and in books. She sings her faith; I preach and teach. I major in truth; she majors in compassion. It's OK. Together we make a pretty decent human being. So don't try to squeeze anyone else into your mold, particularly your spouse. Trust God to have his way with them in a way that fits their personality. Don't get in God's way. Be patient, and like Mary realize there's nothing you can do to fix it. So if your spouse won't come to church with you, come anyway. Don't let your own life with God be held hostage to their stubborn resistance. Nowhere in the marriage vows does it say that one partner gets to play God in the other's life. The danger is in thinking my experience with God implies moral superiority. It does not. Joseph was about to throw Mary away precisely because she claimed a meeting with God that didn't make sense to him. Only God could fix Joseph. Imagine the joy when he said, "Mary, the divorce is off. Last night while I was sleeping.... I almost threw you away. God help us both!"

Joseph went to sleep with one vision of his future and woke with another. Theorists call this *a paradigm shift*.¹⁸ Same life, same problems, radical new understanding. A closed door opened in a dream. A divorce is stopped because God broke through. Fear is gone, trust reestablished, the future reinvented, and there is before them the awesome promise that in Jesus God is going to deal once for all with the sin problem that holds us in cruel captivity. *Jesus* was a common name, like Sam or Mark or Henry, *Jeshua* in Greek, *Joshua* in Hebrew. It's popular meaning was *Yahweh saves*. And the ultimate issue is sin, our inborn, inbred alienation from God. God heals the breach between Mary and Joseph, and in Jesus God heals the breach between the world and himself. Someone wrote:

"If the greatest need had been information, God would have sent an educator. If the greatest need had been technology, God would have

¹⁸ Paul Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker), 317-319.

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sent us a scientist. If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist. If our greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent us an entertainer. But our greatest need was forgiveness, so God sent us a Savior.”¹⁹

I like Joseph. Village guy, a craftsman, looking forward to the delights of marriage like any young man. A righteous man who obeyed Scripture. A compassionate man who cared more for the feelings of others than his own financial welfare. A patient man who mulls and avoids snap decisions. A man open to mystical experiences which illumine Scripture. A man willing to raise a child not his own and marry a woman under a cloud. A man who obeys God despite the misunderstanding it brings. In a world where most of the images of masculinity are violent and selfish and lacking character, Joseph offers us a new starting point. His strength is deeper than macho, and his marriage is a partnership with God. The fiery rivers of male sexuality are under the restraint of self-control. Jesus benefitted from growing up with these two parents; they also benefitted since they were sinners and in need of the salvation their Son came to offer. Divine wisdom is everywhere.

The Isaiah Text (1:22-23)

With the Isaiah citation of verses 22 and 23 we have a number of safeguards in place. How do you know if it’s God who spoke to you in a dream? The first test is deference. Angels are messengers, not self-promoters. This angel spoke about God, about the Holy Spirit, about sin and the saving work of Jesus Christ. An angel who teaches that God is other than Trinity and that sin is not an issue is not from God.²⁰ The New Age is naive on this account. Angels illumine true doctrine; they do not displace it with supposedly higher revelation for personal self-development.

Note that the last phrase of the angel is a quote from Psalm 130, verse 8: “...he will save his people *from their sins*.” An angel who says they’ve come to reveal your hidden divinity and to bring news of a “God without wrath who brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a

¹⁹ Raymond McHenry, *The Best of ‘In Other Words,’* (Houston, TX: Raymond McHenry, 1996), 44.

²⁰ This insight stands in tension with many Mormon angel stories.

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Cross²¹ is not from above, so tell it to go back to the devil where it came from to deceive you. They are demonic imposters, and too many in our gullible culture swallow their drivel. People have encounters all the time; not all are from God.

So if you tell me you've seen or heard from an angel, I will not think you crazy. I'm not a skeptic. I've know too much. God does not ask the pastor's permission before talking with his people. I will not question *that* you had an encounter; I will, however, want to hear what you think it means and how it meshes with the church's doctrines and Scripture. I want to know what costly obedience and mission springs out of your meeting so I can help when the going gets tough. Such meetings are not for spiritual entertainment. I will then patiently watch and see what happens in your life. What is the fruit? I have several friends who've had such encounters.

Note also that not only the content but the very form of the three-part angelic communique is based on Isaiah 7:14. Faithful angels speak the language of Scripture because Scripture is the language of God. If your angel sounds like an afternoon talk show host, it's probably not from God. Now I readily admit that in its original context that this verse from Isaiah had nothing to do with a virginal conception. It was a promise to a besieged Hebrew king that before a young pregnant woman in his court weaned her child, a foreign threat would be removed.²² The child was to be given a symbolic name, *Emmanuel*, a constant reminder that God was with them.

I also want to affirm that Matthew was on target when he went back and read Isaiah through the lens of Jesus' whole life. That both Matthew and Luke tell of a virginal conception, and that they did not know one another's work, demonstrates it was a earlier tradition that preceded them both. The historical meaning of Isaiah's quote does not exhaust the depth of Scripture, and in the light of the full career of Jesus the church delighted in seeing what no one saw before. Scripture should make us open to hearing from God in usual and unusual means, and our living experience should lead us back to Scripture. Scripture without confirming experience is deadly; the letter alone kills. Religious experience without dialog with the Bible is dangerous and deceptive. They belong together, just as Matthew presents them.

²¹ H. Richard Neibuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), 193.

²² M. Eugene Boring, *Matthew: The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VIII* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1996), 135.

Obedience and Restraint (1:24-25)

So Joseph marries a pregnant bride. There was a celebration under the wedding canopy with appropriate blessings, and he took Mary to his home but not to his bed- at least not yet. This is the intent of verse 24, “When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took his wife, *but knew her not until she had borne a son....*”

I said earlier I like Joseph, but that’s too weak. I admire him. Courage, obedience, a recognition Mary has business with God that excludes him for a season. Being caught in God’s purposes isn’t easy; it requires levels of self-control and self-denial not required of others. The text from Isaiah said a virgin would conceive *and deliver*. Mary’s virginity was ended by birth, not by Joseph. What an extraordinary young man, Jesus’ adopted father, chosen by God. Awesome!

It is here that Catholics and Protestants part ways, and it’s over the little word *until* in verse 24. Because of the later non-biblical doctrine of Mary’s perpetual virginity, some read the adverb *until* in a way that does not imply a change of status after the birth of Jesus. And so in art and iconography they portray Joseph as an old man who would be uninterested in Mary as a lover. All sorts of legends grew up later on: that he had children from a former marriage, that he died of old age in AD 18 or 27, that he’d been bodily translated into heaven. All understandable, all imaginary. The earliest representations depict Joseph as a young man in his late teens or early twenties. Only later, in the 5th and 6th centuries, is he portrayed as an old man.²³

Go home and check your mangers.²⁴ If you have an old Joseph, the molds are Catholic, and if a youthful Joseph, the molds are Protestant and biblical. If you cringe to think of Mary as Joseph’s lover, that their later children were conceived just as yours, then you’ve absorbed a teaching which is not part of our faith and which ultimately downgrades other marriages as second class. If the holy family is a celibate marriage, then we will always be tempted- as the Roman tradition has been- to see sexuality as an impediment to holiness rather than as a good gift and avenue for celebration. I admire the courage of celibate priests and nuns who keep their

²³ For a controversial reading of the tradition by a Roman Catholic feminist, see Uta Rank-Heinemann, *Eunuchs For The Kingdom Of God* (New York: Doubleday, 1990).

²⁴ Richard Hoefler, *The Sign In The Straw* (Lima, OH: C.S.S. Pub., 1980), 57.

vows, but the whole structure of thought that undergirds it is flawed. St. Peter was married. Celibacy is a virtue outside marriage, a vice within it. “Do not fear to take Mary your wife” was a command with two fulfillments, one at the wedding, the other after Jesus was born. The delights of marriage are not a block to spirituality but a means of grace for those God enables to marry. For this Jewish couple a season of self-control opened into a marriage of self-giving and other children. To be able to say No and Yes, each at the right time, is a sign of faith and maturity.

Conclusion

Matthew told this story to demonstrate how the one who was *Son of God* from conception by the Spirit was welcomed into the lineage of David. It’s because Joseph named and thus legally adopted him. “And *you* (Joseph) shall call his name Jesus,” the angel commanded. “And *he* called his name Jesus,” reports Matthew in verse 25. Son of God by conception; son of David by legal adoption. The Messianic credentials are now in place. God’s timing and methods are perfect, difficult but perfect. And now we wait for thirty years as Jesus matures as one of the boys and men of Nazareth. The world goes on, but the secret agent is already undercover, waiting for the signal to go public.

What a wild, wonderful God we serve, a God who snuck down the back steps of history when no one was looking recruited two young people to partner in the greatest story ever told. I’m risking my life and career and future and eternity on this story. What are you risking your’s on? I think it’s a good deal. Maybe before its over I’ll learn what it is to be a true man and a true husband and true father and a true partner with God and my wife in our calling. I want to be a better man, and I believe even that desire is from God. What could be better than that? We could use a few more men who’ve walked the Joseph way. Mary was Jesus’ first disciple and Joseph the second. They were his earliest apprentices.

Gentlemen, it’s time to find a better way to be a man. There is a way. Have you tried it? Are you still running your own life, or have you said Yes to being a follower of Jesus. You can settle that today and begin life’ biggest adventure.
