

# CALLED TO BE EMMANUEL

DEVOTIONAL READING: Isaiah 42:1-9

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Matthew 1:18-25

TODAY'S SCRIPTURE: Matthew 1:18-25

## I. Facing the News

### Matthew 1:18-19

**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 publick example, was minded to put her away privily.**

18. Following the Jewish custom of that day, *Joseph* was probably considerably older than his bride-to-be, perhaps in his mid to late 20s while she was in her mid to late teens. Before their wedding, *Mary* was told by the angel Gabriel that she would soon bear a child—a human impossibility in view of the fact that she was still a virgin. One can only imagine how Joseph felt upon discovering that his fiancée was *with child*. Any explanation from her that this was the result not of unfaithfulness but of the power of *the Holy Ghost* must have been mind-boggling, to say the least.

19. *Mary* and *Joseph her husband* were not yet married, in the sense that they were not living together in the same household. But ancient Jewish custom considered betrothed couples to be legally bound to one another once their

engagement had been announced and the dowry paid.

Joseph's presumed anger over the situation could have inclined him to demand the justice that the Law of Moses clearly prescribes. Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22 both state that those convicted of adultery are to be executed. At the very least, Joseph could have publicly terminated the engagement and kept the dowry. That also would have brought disgrace to *Mary* and her family. Such a move would have been completely justified, given what Joseph knew at this point.

Yet in this case, compassion won the day. Realizing that the child was not his, Joseph decided to call off the engagement quietly. His attitude was reflected in the description of Joseph as *a just man*. Joseph was clearly a man of remarkable faith and compassion. These traits come to the forefront of today's passage and are critical to Matthew's larger account of the circumstances of Jesus' birth and early childhood.

## II. Seeing the Big Picture

### Matthew 1:20-23

**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.**

20a. Matthew's account of the events leading to Jesus' birth is filled with dreams. Four dreams were all communications to Joseph, calculated to empower him to protect Mary and Jesus from harm (2:13, 19-20, 22).

While anyone would be awed by even one such experience, Joseph in particular must have been surprised by these revelatory dreams. In the Old Testament, very few people learned about God's plans in dreams; they include Abraham (Genesis 15:12-16), Jacob (28:10-15), Joseph (37:5-9), Solomon (1 Kings 3:5), and Daniel (Daniel 7:1-27). Undoubtedly, there had been nothing in Joseph's life to this point to suggest that he would be numbered with this select group.

20b. What Joseph shared with most others who experienced revelatory dreams in the Bible was faithfulness to God. And what he learned from his first dream was more significant than anything God had ever revealed to anyone before. Mary's pregnancy was supernatural in origin. Joseph was called to partner with God in caring for both her and her baby in order for God's eternal purposes to be fulfilled.

The phrase *of the Holy Ghost* parallels the angel Gabriel's announcement to Mary in Luke 1:35. Luke underscores the implication of the virgin birth by noting that

Jesus, having no biological father, would be "Son of the Highest" (Luke 1:32). This title has less to do with the manner of His conception and more to do with Christ's rights and authorities as the sole heir of everything that belongs to His divine Father.

21. Ancient names were often symbolic, associating a person with an event or identifying an important attribute. Following a similar pattern, *Jesus* is the Greek version of the common Hebrew name Joshua, which means "God saves."

Joseph perhaps thought of the biblical hero Joshua, whom God used to lead Israel into the promised land. Joseph's adopted son, Jesus, would not *save . . . his people* from political oppression (as many Jews in that time expected of the Messiah), but instead would save them *from their sins*. In His death, Jesus saved the world from sin by becoming the ultimate sacrifice.

22. Matthew pauses the story to remind his readers of a second way in which the significance of Christ's birth and mission was revealed to the world: the ancient and public testimony of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Matthew quotes or makes reference to prophetic texts several other times in his account of Jesus' birth (Matthew 1:23; 2:6, 15, 18, 23). These citations demonstrate that the circumstances of the Messiah's birth, although not what most Jews anticipated, were nevertheless consistent with what God had promised. Put another way, while many Jews and pagan religious experts like the wise men (2:1-2) would have expected the king of the Jews to be born in a royal palace, Matthew shows from Scripture that Jesus' humble origins are actually proofs of His messianic identity.

23. This prophecy from Isaiah 7:14 was delivered during a particularly dark period in Israel's history. Isaiah lived in the eighth century BC, about 200 years after the split

between the northern and southern tribes following the death of Solomon (1 Kings 11:41–12:24). Sometime in the 740s BC, the northern kingdom, Israel, allied with Syria and invaded the southern kingdom, Judah (2 Kings 16:5). During the ensuing siege of Jerusalem, Isaiah met with the Judean King Ahaz to encourage him, promising that God would overthrow his enemies. Isaiah even invited him to ask for a divine sign that victory would come (Isaiah 7:1-11).

Feigning piety, King Ahaz refused, saying that he did not want to test God (Isaiah 7:12). In fact, he had already decided to seek protection from an earthly ally: he had sent ambassadors to negotiate with the Assyrian king, padding the offer with a large quantity of gold and silver taken from the Jerusalem temple. Assyria responded by attacking and subjugating Israel. As a gesture of thanks, King Ahaz built an altar in the temple, patterned after one he had seen in the Assyrian capital (2 Kings 16:10-18).

Isaiah recognized the faithlessness of this strategy. He offered the king of Judah a sign quite different from one the wicked king might have requested: as evidence that God himself would deliver Judah from its enemies, a child named “Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14) was to be born. Before a certain child reached age 12 or 13 (10:16), the nations of which the king was so terrified would cease to exist. After the Assyrian defeated those nations, they would “get theirs” at the hands of the Babylonians, who destroyed tiny Judah in 586 BC.

Matthew definitely saw the fullest significance of Isaiah’s words in the birth of Jesus. But in the long term, this sign referred to the coming of the Christ, the ultimate “Emmanuel . . . God with us” (Matthew 1:23). The Bible emphasizes the importance of God being “with” his

people (examples: Genesis 26:3; 31:3; Exodus 3:12; Isaiah 43:2; John 14:3; Revelation 3:20). This is more than a figure of speech. In Jesus it has become a fact: “the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). Through Jesus’ ministry, God would indeed be with His people in an unprecedented way.

### III. Accepting the Call Matthew 1:24-25

**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.**

24. Any doubts Joseph may have had were settled by his remarkable dream. Consistent with his faithful character, he did not question what God showed him or hesitate to act. Instead, he immediately proceeded with the marriage.

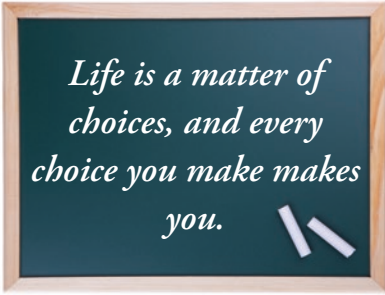
25. Joseph not only obeyed God’s instruction to take Mary as his wife, but also went a step further by not consummating the marriage until Jesus had been born. God had not told him to do this, and the Law of Moses did not forbid sex during pregnancy. So Joseph’s choice of abstinence most likely reflected his own sense of the gravity of the situation. This point is stressed to ensure that there can be no confusion about Jesus’ paternity: Mary had not been sexually active at any point before or during her miraculous pregnancy.

Following the birth of Jesus, the couple clearly had a normal married life. This is evident from the fact that Jesus had at least four brothers and three sisters (see Matthew 13:55-56; Mark 6:3). Two of His half-brothers became leaders in the church. They wrote the two epistles that bear their names: James and Jude.

# INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

## CALLED TO BE EMMANUEL

### Into the Lesson



In each pair, circle the option that appeals strongest to you:

- 1—Eat vanilla ice cream or chocolate ice cream.
- 2—Watch TV or listen to music.
- 3—Shop in a store or shop online.
- 4—Eat at a restaurant or eat at home.
- 5—Drink coffee or drink tea.
- 6—Dress up or dress casually.

The choices Joseph faced were far more important than any of these! Let's see what his decisions can teach us.

### Into the Word

Read Matthew 1:18-25. Answer the following questions as if you were Joseph.

1—When you found out that Mary was pregnant, what thoughts other than those recorded in Matthew 1 crossed your mind?

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2—When the angel appeared to you in a dream, how did you know the dream was not merely an ordinary one?

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3—What was the deciding factor that caused you to honor the angel's instructions?

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### Into Life

Write a prayer of thanks for the gift of Jesus.

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### THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Faithful people trust God, especially in extraordinary situations.