

## Joseph's Dilemma: justice and mercy in the balance

A Commentary on Matthew 1:18 - 25

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### Introduction

Although Matthew and Luke both relate information they had about the birth of Jesus, they relate very different details. This may be because they each had incomplete parts of the whole story and only related what they had. It may also be that they each wanted to emphasize different points to help them accomplish the larger goals they each have for their Gospels. However, even though, they relate different details they do not contradict each other, rather they compliment each other. Matthew does not tell us much about Mary. Luke tells us the story through Mary's point of view and barely mentions Joseph. Matthew tells us about Joseph's role and barely mentions Mary. In these ways, we get different points of view that help us understand events that happened two thousand years ago and how significant they were.

1:18 - 19

**This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about:**

**His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph,**

Matthew begins this section by telling his readers about the nature of Joseph and Mary's relationship as a couple. They are pledged to be married or betrothed. Betrothal was very different from our culture's engagement. Families usually chose their children's marriage partners for them. It was a legally binding commitment that could be broken only by death or divorce. They could even be called husband and wife. The then current Roman emperor Augustus set the minimum age for betrothal at 10 years of age. Jewish girls were often married before reaching 12 and a half. The families for three reasons. The father of the bride could receive the "bride-price" as soon as his daughter reached puberty, the husband could have her service for longer (remember people did not live as long then) and the bride's father could more easily guarantee his daughter's virginity. The husband was often in his late teens, as he needed the extra time to learn a trade and save money for a house.

Typically, the families involved gave three gifts. If they followed the typical customs of the day then Joseph's family gave what is called a "bride-price" to Mary's family. We should not think of this as purchasing Mary but as a symbol of sealing a covenant that bound the two families together. Second, Mary's father gave Joseph and Mary a dowry which would help them with the expenses of starting a new family. Finally, Joseph gave Mary a gift that would symbolize his commitment to their relationship. This would serve the purpose an engagement ring does today.<sup>1</sup>

These gifts were usually exchanged at the betrothal ceremony. As a result, the bride and groom were legally joined, could be separated only by death or divorce and could be called husband and wife. If one died then the other was called a widow or widower.

During this 12-month betrothal period, the daughter remained in her father's house and under his control. Mary's father betrothed her to Joseph sometime in the past 12 months. At the end of this time, the bride and groom had a public ceremony and moved into their own digs if they had the means. The couple consummated the marriage by intercourse at the end of this time.<sup>2</sup> Sexual intercourse before the permitted time was a violation of the marriage customs in only some locals.<sup>3</sup> This betrothal between Joseph and Mary fulfilled the typical and legal requirement. Therefore, it affirms Mary's virginity.

**but before they came together,  
she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.**

"Before they came together" means "before they consummated their marriage with intercourse." Matthew does not tell us how she was found to be with child. Did she tell anyone before she began to show her pregnancy? We don't know. Luke tells us that the angel Gabriel came to Mary and told her:

"You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus."

Mary asked him, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

Gabriel answered her: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."

These statements do not mean that God had sex with Mary. Some have gotten confused about this because other ancient religions had myths that involved a god having sex with a mortal woman who then gave birth to a child, which they called a son of god. There has been a movement in scholarship over the years that believes that Christianity got its main ideas from pagan religions and therefore was not really unique. They attempt to bring Christianity and especially Jesus Christ down to the level of pagan mythology. There are many problems with this approach which I don't have time to address this morning, and as I said, these verses cannot mean that God had sex with Mary like those mythological gods. We have time for two reasons. First, Yahweh God is a different kind of God altogether than those mythological gods. He does not need to procreate through humans or by human means. He is the God who can create something out of nothing. Second, there has never been an example in the OT where these expressions mean sexual activity or were connected to the conception of a child.<sup>4</sup>

Mary's pregnancy is miraculous. God created the embryo of Jesus in her virgin uterus without the use of a father's sperm.

Even so, that she was found to be with child introduces the conflict in this short sub-story. Now Joseph finds himself in a dilemma.

**Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.**

Luke tells also that Gabriel told Mary her relative Elizabeth was pregnant (with John the Baptist). Mary traveled about 100 miles south to visit Elizabeth and stayed with her for three months until John was born. Therefore, Mary returns to Nazareth three to four months pregnant. Did Mary tell her parents and Joseph about what the angel said to her before she went to visit Elizabeth? We don't know, but apparently, if she did Joseph did not believe her. Why didn't Zechariah and Elizabeth vouch for her? I don't know.

Matthew says that Joseph was a righteous man. Here this means two things. First, he lived his life according to the Laws God gave to Moses. Moses recorded them in Exodus and Leviticus. Second, it means that he was willing and able to apply the Law that God gave Moses about what to do with a woman who committed adultery. The Law stipulated that he could divorce her and the law also stipulated that the community can stone to death a woman who committed adultery. Although by the time of Jesus this seems to be carried out only rarely. However, she would still suffer much social disgrace.

Matthew also relates that Joseph was merciful. He intended to simply divorce Mary privately, without making a public display of it. This shows that Joseph had a genuine mercy. He could have made a public display of his mercy, as we will see other people doing later in the Gospel. Jesus will confront those who make a big public display of their mercy in order to look righteous. Joseph, however, was truly righteous because his righteousness genuinely from the heart and needed no audience beside God. Joseph could also have made a public display of justice as others were doing, but those people aren't as interested in true justice as they are in their own political power. Joseph's righteousness, or justice, was a true justice because he could be satisfied with carrying it out in private.

Joseph had a dilemma. He wanted to be obedient to the Law and be merciful. If he claimed that Jesus was his child then he would be lying. The ninth of the Ten Commandments says to not lie. In addition, he would be admitting to breaking the social custom about not having sex with his betrothed until after the marriage ceremony. Being a righteous man he did not want to lie or admit to a wrong doing he was not guilty of. On the other hand, Joseph wanted to be merciful to Mary. How could he be both righteous and merciful at the same time? He believed that by divorcing her quietly and privately he could accomplish both. He solved the problem from a human point of view but not from God's point of view, as we will see.

The first lesson we can learn from this is that we need to balance justice and mercy and that we must look for God's way to do that, not just a humanly expedient way to do it.

**For thought and discussion:**

In v. 19 Matthew tells us:

“Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.”

In what ways do you observe people making a false, public display of their justice and mercy at the expense of others?

In what ways have you seen people demonstrating that they are truly righteous and merciful in quiet, even private ways?

We often face the dilemma of how to balance justice and mercy. What principles can we use in doing what is both righteous and merciful?

How might solving the dilemma from a human point of view not solve it in God's point of view?

20 - 21

**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.**

The angel addresses Joseph as Joseph son of David instead of Joseph son of Jacob (his immediate father). This draws attention to the fact that the Jews were expecting the Messiah to come as a descendant of David. This sets the stage for telling Joseph that Mary is bearing that very Messiah in her womb.

**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.”**

The angel clearly tells Joseph that this son is the Messiah. The angel's words confirm Mary's story and give Joseph specific instructions to obey.

Matthew does not tell us about Gabriel's visit to Mary which Luke relates (Lk. 1:26-38). If Matthew knew about it, why didn't he relate it? He chooses to focus on Joseph instead. This story comes just after Joseph's genealogy, which establishes his heritage as a descendant of David. The Messiah had to be a descendant of David. The angel addresses Joseph as son of David rather than by his immediate father Jacob. It will be Joseph's responsibility to name the boy Jesus, which he does in verse 25, to show his obedience. Matthew will relate two more times that the angel communicates to Joseph in dreams giving him further instructions about how to provide for and protect Jesus. Neither Luke nor Matthew tells us if or when Mary told Joseph about what Gabriel told her. It seems most likely that she told him, but he did not believe her. This is probably why the angel visited him in a dream.

22 - 23

**All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:**

**“The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, “God with us.”**

Isaiah uttered these words in 734 B.C. At that time, the 12 tribes of the nation of Israel were divided into two large kingdoms, the southern kingdom of Judah and the northern kingdom called Israel. Each kingdom had its own king. King Ahaz was the king of the southern kingdom of Judah, which he ruled from Jerusalem. Early in his reign the king of Israel and the king of the Gentile kingdom of Aram formed an unholy alliance to conquer Judah so they could install a puppet king over it (the son of Tabeel – 7:6). However, Isaiah assured King Ahaz that this would not happen because God had promised King David that his throne would only ever have one of his descendants on it. King Ahaz was so afraid that he could not believe Isaiah, so God, through Isaiah, gave him a sign anyway. The sign would be that

Isaiah 7:14-17

“a virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel. He will eat curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right. But before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste. The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on the house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah—he will bring the king of Assyria.”

When this comes about, Ahaz will know that God will save him and his throne. We don't have the name of the woman or the details, but apparently, after it all happens they will learn about a woman, who was only an unmarried virgin at the time of the prophecy, and who got married, bore a son and named him Immanuel. Then, before he was even old enough to know right from wrong the crisis was over because God sent the king of Assyria to destroy Israel and Aram. In fact, Assyria conquered Israel and Aram only two years later in 732 B.C., almost immediately fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy in a chillingly sober way.<sup>5</sup>

Like many OT prophecies this had a near term fulfillment and a later fulfillment as well. Only two chapters later (9:1-7) Isaiah predicts that a child will be born in the future who will reign on David's throne forever. It is likely that he saw this as a later fulfillment of the earlier prophecy. Now, Matthew claims that this later fulfillment has taken place through Mary and Jesus.

Matthew tells his Greek readers that the Hebrew name Immanuel means “God is with us.” Is the fact that the angel tells Joseph to name the child “Jesus” a contradiction? Not really. People can be referred to by two or more names. Immanuel is not meant to be a formal name given by his parents. It is more a figure of speech to describe something that is true about Jesus as the Messiah. This is a fitting name for the Messiah since he is to represent God's presence among his people. At the end of his Gospel, Matthew records Jesus as promising his disciples: “I will be with you always” (28:20).

The name Jesus tells us what he will do—save people from their sins. The name Immanuel tells us by what authority and source this forgiveness comes—God himself.

Through the angel's words, Joseph now knows that the child in Mary's womb is the Messiah. Why did Matthew insert these words by Isaiah into this story? This is the type of question that is helpful to ask of every part of a passage of Scripture: Why did the author say this? Why did the author choose this word, phrase, sentence, story, etc? Why did the author include this and leave out something else? In this case, Matthew uses Isaiah's words to assure his own readers that Jesus fulfills OT predictions about the Messiah. In turn, it reassures us that our belief is correct that Jesus is the Messiah, the savior of the world. He really is the one the OT prophets predicted.

24 - 25

**When Joseph woke up,  
he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.  
But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son.  
And he gave him the name Jesus.**

These sentences give the conclusion to this section and emphasize Joseph's obedience. Matthew does not give any of the details of Jesus' birth as Luke does. He has chosen to write about other aspects instead. Matthew relates Joseph's role as the head of Jesus' family and the obedience that God required for him to fulfill that role.

The simple theme of this passage is Joseph's obedience, however, being obedient to God is sometimes not simple, is rarely easy and often costs something. Quietly divorcing Mary would be the easy way out. His own reputation would not be at stake. He could start over. Some people would probably praise him for his grace: "Joseph, you're a good man. You could have insisted that we stone Mary for adultery, but instead you showed mercy. You're a kind, gracious and merciful man." However, taking Mary as his wife will be a lot more costly for him. People might gossip about him getting Mary pregnant before their wedding night, or gossip that he is not the real father of the son he is raising. By obeying God, Joseph risked suffering social disgrace that he did not deserve or ask for.

The second lesson we learn from Joseph is that obedience to God takes precedence over our social comfort and acceptance. We too must be willing to suffer social ridicule in order to obey God.

The first lesson we talked about was that we need to balance justice and mercy and that we must look for God's way to do that, not just a humanly expedient way to do it.

**For thought and discussion:**

Joseph and Mary had to have been shocked and amazed by what God was doing. The Messiah, they learned from childhood, would be a great and powerful ruler, a king. If they ever imagined the Messiah would enter the world as a baby, they certainly would have thought of him being born to some other king, or priest, or anyone but a peasant girl. All of the sudden they are thrust

onto the stage of the world and are now carrying the next king of the Jews around with them. They had to feel a heavy burden or responsibility.

What do they know about raising a king? Why did God choose them? How was Jesus able to identify with common people as a result? Put yourself in Joseph and Mary's situation? How would this situation revolutionize your life?

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<sup>1</sup> Wilkins, Michael J. *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew*. Zondervan. 2004. p. 73.

<sup>2</sup> Green, Joel B. *The Gospel of Luke*. Eerdmans. 1997. p. 86.

<sup>3</sup> Nolland, John. *Word Biblical Commentary: Luke 1-9:20*. Word. 1989.

<sup>4</sup> Green. p. 54.

<sup>5</sup> Wilkins. p. 80.