

# I'll Betrothe For Christmas

Matthew 1:18-25 December 24, 2023

## **Matthew 1:18a - <sup>18</sup>The birth of Jesus Christ came about this way...**

In most of our favorite Christmas movies, things do not work out the way the main characters expect. Along the way, they experience a lot of frustration and let down. Charlie Brown can't quite figure out what Christmas is all about. In *Home Alone*, the McCallisters' meticulous plans are all derailed. *Nothing* goes right for the Griswold family in *Christmas Vacation* - not the turkey, not the lights, not even the drive to get the tree.

And then there's George Bailey in *It's A Wonderful Life*. Staring out over that bridge it seemed his whole life had worked out wrong. But then an angel appears and gives him the *true* perspective on things. In all of those Christmas classics and others still, by the end, the main characters, often the dad, realize that what they *thought* they were looking for wasn't really what mattered most. What they *really* needed was something else.

Matthew's telling of the arrival of the Savior focuses on the man who would become Jesus' adoptive father: Joseph. Joseph was a *good* man - faithful and willing to do hard things. We'll see that in our text. But, Joseph's life was *not quite working out* the way one might have hoped.

You see, he was a descendant of David. And, even if he never actually thought that he *should* be king, at very least it would be hard to know that you are a member of the royal family, but instead of ruling in luxury, you were a poor carpenter,<sup>1</sup> subjugated by a pagan empire, which was forcing you to take a long and costly trip back to a random town attached to your ancestors.

Joseph would never be king. That was to be expected, unfair as it was. What *wasn't* expected was how things suddenly went sideways in his *personal* life when Jesus arrived in His Incarnation.

## **Matthew 1:18b - After his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, it was discovered before they came together that she was pregnant from the Holy Spirit.**

*Matthew* knew she was pregnant from the Holy Spirit. *Mary* knew it. But apparently she hadn't explained her visit from Gabriel to her betrothed husband, Joseph.

In the Jewish customs of the time, there was a period of engagement - a year - before the man and wife started living together. But, that betrothal period was legally binding.<sup>2</sup> That's why Joseph is going to be called *Mary's husband* in the very next verse. If you wanted out of betrothal, you would have to *officially* divorce.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 2:24 indicates that Joseph and Mary did not have enough money for the normal offering prescribed at the presentation of a firstborn.

<sup>2</sup> Douglas Sean O'Donnell *Matthew: All Authority In Heaven And On Earth*

Mary being pregnant was a big problem, culturally speaking. It would scandalize their families and communities. Joseph undoubtedly *loved* Mary. He *wanted* to marry her. But now, if he wanted to be faithful to God's Law, he had a *duty* to either divorce her quietly, or bring her to stand trial before the Jewish leaders. Under the Law, those were his only 2 options.

**Matthew 1:19 - <sup>19</sup> So her husband, Joseph, being a righteous man, and not wanting to disgrace her publicly, decided to divorce her secretly.**

Joseph was a remarkable man - a man of care and character. We see, on the one hand, he wasn't going to *ignore* the Law of God, even if it meant having to part ways with the woman he loved. He "demonstrate[s] that his love for God [was] stronger than his love for Mary."<sup>3</sup> *But* it's clear that he *did* love Mary. Even though she *seems* to have totally violated their relationship and marriage contract and social convention, it was important to Joseph that she *not* be disgraced publicly. He chose this quiet option that saves face, not for him - it saves face for *Mary*.

Joseph exemplifies for us the fact that *real* righteousness always includes *mercy*. In that way, Joseph's righteousness *exceeded* the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees.<sup>4</sup> It was a foreshadow of the way Jesus would treat the woman caught in adultery in John 8.

But, the Law was the Law, and so Joseph started making arrangements to break off his relationship with his fiancé.

I imagine his heart was absolutely crushed. He's a good man. He's a righteous man. If I were him, I can imagine I'd pray something like, "*Lord, what am I supposed to do? I can't live out my royal blood right. I'm a poor laborer. I'm getting pushed around by the Roman Empire. I'm trying to carve out a little life for myself and start a family with what little prospects I've got. I'm serious about following the Law and honoring You as God of my life. And now my marriage can't happen?*"

**Matthew 1:20 - <sup>20</sup> But after he had considered these things, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because what has been conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.**

We're not told whether Mary tried to convince him. But we see *he* was thinking a lot about it. He didn't act emotionally or in haste. He *considered* the situation, and made what he thought was the best decision moving forward. The problem is, he didn't have all the information he needed to make this life decision. He didn't know the levers of providence that were in motion.

So, before Joseph can make his 'best' decision, the Lord changes the situation. In all those Christmas movies, there's always a pivot-point. George Bailey meets Clarence. Charlie Brown hears God's Word from Linus. Kevin McCallister talks to the scary, bearded neighbor.

<sup>3</sup> Douglas R.A. Hare *Matthew: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary For Teaching And Preaching*

<sup>4</sup> Charles Quarles *Matthew*

How interesting that the angel called Joseph, "Joseph, *son of David*." A lot of good the family name had done him so far in life. But we see that God knows what is true about you, God installs eternal value in you, God sees the culmination of His work in you, even if the rest of the world passes you by. It didn't matter to *Rome* that he was a son of David. It didn't matter to the Innkeepers of Bethlehem. But it mattered to the Lord and the Lord had not forgotten. In fact, the Lord had decided to give Joseph a personal, hand-tailored part to play in the drama of redemption.

This is what God wants to do with *every single child of God!* Your life may not be working out according to your five-year plan or the dream you had when you were a little boy or girl. But *God* has a providential plan that is shaking up the cosmos, displaying His grace and glory and power to all the powers in all the heavens. And He has written a part for *you* to play.

The angel clears up where Jesus *came* from, but things were still sticky. Joseph was being asked to live a sacrificial life for the *rest* of his life - a life of social embarrassment. People would whisper everywhere they went. His whole life would now be oriented not around his own dreams or his own greatness, but instead, his whole life would revolve around this job that God had given Joseph and Mary to do: Raise and nurture the Messiah. But *how* could they possibly do it 'right?'

The angel continued in verse 21.

**Matthew 1:21 - *21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.***

*You* are to name Him. Mary had an incredible, unique calling placed on her life. She would bear the Christ into the world. Jewish mothers for millennia had hoped to be chosen by God to be a part of this work. So, on the one hand, Mary has this monumental job that she is remembered for. *But*, she would need help. A *lot* of help. And the Lord expected Joseph to serve *with* her in this endeavor. He couldn't do what she was asked to do, but what he *could* do was help and support and provide and protect and lead and partner with her in raising the *Messiah in their home!*

His name would be *Jesus*. Scholars explain that depending on whether you study how the name *sounds* or what its etymology is, the name means "He will save," or, "Yahweh is salvation," or "O save, Yahweh!"<sup>5</sup> or, "Yahweh saves, He and not another."<sup>6</sup>

This is Who Jesus is. The little Baby in the nativity set is *God* Himself, come in human flesh. Fully God and fully man. He came for one reason: Someone had to *die* for the sin of the world. Someone had to pay the fine that we all owe for all the wrongs we've done and the wrongs done to us.

There is just *One* Savior. And we are a people who need saving. Who will rescue humanity from our downward spiral? Who will save us from our failures and mistakes and sin? The average Christmas movie is usually vague in the end. It's *togetherness* or *family* or *just not being so tightly wound*. But

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<sup>5</sup> R.T. France *Matthew: An Introduction And Commentary*

<sup>6</sup> Quarles

we all know the Griswolds are going to have a terrible Christmas *next* year. The McCallisters weren't any better in Home Alone 2. Those vague "just be nicer" messages don't really hold water.

We need saving. God knew it before we did and He made a plan. His plan was to come Himself, born of a virgin, to live a sinless life, die a death He did not deserve, rise again the third day. This was the *only* way that He could bridge the gap between God and man and reconcile us to Himself.

Matthew peels back the curtain to show us how this has been God's glorious plan of salvation all along.

**Matthew 1:22 - <sup>22</sup> Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: <sup>23</sup> See, the virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they will name him Immanuel, which is translated "God is with us."**

What God promises, He will do. No matter what. *That's* why Joseph and Mary didn't need to be afraid. It didn't mean things wouldn't be hard - in fact, they'd be running for their lives in a few verses - but God is a God of promise and presence. Not *presents*, though He loves to give gifts, *presence*, meaning His desire is to be *with* us. Coming into the earth in His Incarnation, He said, "Ok, I'm the eternal God, I hold everything together in the palm of My hand. But I've got a new name I'd like you to use for Me: Immanuel. God with us."

**Matthew 1:24-25 - <sup>24</sup> When Joseph woke up, he did as the Lord's angel had commanded him. He married her <sup>25</sup> but did not have sexual relations with her until she gave birth to a son. And he named him Jesus.**

Joseph was a man of faith in action. Once God spoke, it was time to *do*. He named Him Jesus. This was the first of *three* midnight dream-meetings with angels that Joseph would experience. After each one he did exactly what the Lord asked.

But there were *many* other days *without* angel visits were Joseph *also* did what the Lord asked. It must have been hard to know that you have the King of kings in your care, but you can't give Him a palace. There wouldn't be many nights of feasting. There were no royal robes or grand parades. Just the three of them, and then siblings that came later. Living small, living far from home for awhile. It may have felt like things didn't work out the way you'd want. Their life may have felt small and insignificant or meager. But what *God* cared about and wanted for them was working out just fine because *He* was the One accomplishing it by His own power and grace.

You and I are not called to foster the Messiah. But He has *other* callings for you and me. We discover them by loving Him and being in His presence, by hearing His Word and doing what we've been told. We join in His magnificent, Kingdom work as we relinquish control of our life's decisions and instead allow Him to direct and propel and move us through this walk we're on with Him. If you feel things are not working out, look to God's gift, His Son, our Savior, Who is *still* with you, still Immanuel even now and writing you the most important part you could ever play.