

Explore the Bible Adult Leader Commentary

Session 2

The King Arrives

Matthew 1:18-25

Context: Matthew 1:1-25

Memory Verse: Matthew 1:21

Main Idea: Jesus' miraculous birth fulfilled Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah.

FIRST THOUGHTS

"I promise." That statement flows freely in conversation. A promise is an assurance that a specific thing will happen. Some retail establishments post "Promises to Our Customers." Parents make promises to children. Teachers offer promises to students. Friends dole out promises to friends. Making promises, however, is always easier than keeping them. A broken promise can do great damage to a relationship. But a promise kept often lifts your spirit.

(In PSG, p. 22) How did you feel when someone followed through on a commitment to you?

God proved Himself to be a promise keeper. His greatest promise was that a Messiah would come to save His people. Throughout much of the history of the Old Testament, God's people anticipated that Messiah's arrival. That history included times of trouble and depression. This heightened their longing for God's Anointed One. They expected Him to bring relief to their desperate situation. The Messiah, however, did not appear on a human timetable. In fact, many wondered if God forgot His promise. Some gave up on the Messiah ever coming. Still others latched on to every charismatic figure who arrived on the scene and considered that person the messiah. These would-be messiahs always let people down. As time passed, hope gave way to despair.

God never forgot His people or His promise. He simply waited for just the right moment in history. Matthew wrote to explain how God finally fulfilled His promise of a King. That Messiah, Jesus, arrived on the scene in a most unusual way. The birth of a special Child brought centuries of waiting to a climax.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

Matthew 1:1-25

A good writer grabs the attention of readers from the start. You might consider a list of names to be the least effective way to get the readers' attention. But not if the reader happened to be of Jewish descent. Names established origin, and origin mattered greatly to the Jews. The first readers of Matthew's Gospel hailed mainly from Jewish roots. Names helped illuminate a major purpose of Matthew. Names identified the subjects of the Gospel as Jesus, from whence He came, and even the focus of His life.

The first verse of the Gospel states its purpose to provide a historical record and its subject as Jesus. The record gave the early church a greater sense of how it fit into God's plan. The subject, Jesus, reminded the church that its life centered on Him and His work. Matthew 1:1-25 established two essential and connected truths about Jesus Christ. He was both fully human and fully divine. The writer established that fact in verse 1. Matthew verified the human origin of Jesus as "Son of David" and "Son of Abraham." As "Christ" ("anointed one"), Jesus existed as God's divine Son.

The genealogy of verses 2-17 explains the human origins of Jesus and connects Him with Old Testament history. The movement of God at work in Jewish history is summarized in this list. Matthew outlined the genealogy in three blocks of names. From Abraham to David highlighted a time of prosperity and growth. From David to the Babylonian exile exhibited a period of rebellion and decline. From the Babylonian exile to Jesus led to God's fulfillment of His offer of salvation. The prominence of Abraham and David signified God's use of selected individuals to achieve His purposes. God promised to bless all nations through Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3). To David God promised to establish his throne forever (2 Sam. 7:16). God fulfilled both of those promises through Jesus.

Details about the divine origins of Jesus appear in Matthew 1:18-25. His names connect Him with God and the divine work of salvation. Matthew emphasized how Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecies of a coming Messiah. As both fully human and fully divine, Jesus brought unique qualifications to His role as King and Savior.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

SUPERNATURAL CONCEPTION (Matt. 1:18)

¹⁸ The birth of Jesus Christ came about this way: After His mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, it was discovered before they came together that she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit.

VERSE 18

Having chronicled the historical record of Jesus' heritage (1:1-17), Matthew began to explore relevant information from Jesus' life. The *birth* of Jesus and the circumstances surrounding it set the tone for the rest of the Gospel. The uniqueness of Jesus' beginnings provides readers with insight that allows them to be fully aware of His special nature as divine and human.

When the time came, Mary gave birth like any other woman. Certainly God performs a miracle every time a child comes into the world. What made Jesus' birth unique was His origin. How Mary came to be pregnant made Jesus and His coming different from all other births. The supernatural nature of her pregnancy sets Jesus' birth apart from all others. Mary's pregnancy occurred in a way that had never happened before or since.

Mary became pregnant before she and Joseph *came together*. They had no intimate sexual relationship with each other. They were *engaged* at that point. Jewish wedding traditions of that day involved three stages leading to the completion of a marriage. The first stage took the form of an arrangement made by the parents of a couple. Both were too young to marry at that time. A second stage, betrothal, took place about one year before the marriage became final. The bride continued to live in her father's house during this period. The girl was considered the wife of her husband even though they did not live together. The third stage, marriage, completed the process. A public ceremony marked the occasion, and the couple began to live together as husband and wife.

Prior to the finalization of the marriage of Mary and Joseph, she became *pregnant by the Holy Spirit*. She conceived without a sexual relationship with a man; she was a virgin. Divine activity existed as the only possible way for that to happen. This highlights the supernatural, divine origin of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Greek myths depicted gods impregnating virgins through sexual intercourse. Mary's conception differed in the sense that God made her pregnant miraculously. No physical encounter took place. God does not need to use actions that humans can explain to accomplish His purpose. He creates life in the way He chooses. Luke also noted the Holy Spirit's role in the conception of Jesus (see Luke 1:35).

How does the supernatural origin of Jesus enlighten your faith? In what ways does the Holy Spirit continue to exert the creative power of God today?

PROMISED MESSIAH (Matt. 1:19-23)

¹⁹ So her husband Joseph, being a righteous man, and not wanting to disgrace her publicly, decided to divorce her secretly. ²⁰ But after he had considered these things, an angel of the Lord suddenly 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 by the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to name Him Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins." ²² Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³ 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."

VERSE 19

The Gospel writer identified *Joseph* as Mary's *husband*. When the couple entered the year-long second stage of marriage called betrothal, they formally consented to follow through with the earlier agreement. At that time the couple legally became husband and wife even though they did not live together. Ending the relationship during that period required divorce.

Joseph faced a dilemma when he discovered Mary's pregnancy. He did not father the child. By all appearances Mary had been unfaithful to him. The law permitted the stoning of an adulteress (see Deut. 22:13-30). Joseph, a *righteous man*, preferred another course of action. The righteous nature of Joseph meant that he adhered strictly to the law. And probably he knew the law well. In this case, however, *righteous* may mean that Joseph had a heart of mercy and kindness. He showed this by not wanting to *disgrace her publicly*. Certainly the law gave him the right to humiliate her openly. Her pregnancy eventually became public knowledge. This presented potential embarrassment for Joseph and his extended family. As a righteous person, however, he wanted to do things in a way that honored God.

The decision to *divorce her secretly* was within his rights (see Deut. 24:1). Exercising this option in secret emphasizes Joseph's compassionate character. He willingly put himself in a position to take part of the blame for the failed marriage, though he did nothing

to deserve that blame. A quiet divorce gave Joseph the ability to follow the law, which he wanted to do as a righteous person, and to be merciful at the same time.

VERSE 20

Joseph undoubtedly struggled with the decision about what to do with Mary. He *considered* all the options. He reached what seemed to be a reasonable plan. The Lord, however, had other ideas and interrupted Joseph's strategy.

An *angel* came to Joseph *in a dream*. God often communicated through dreams in the Bible, and He often used angels to be His messengers. He sent them on missions to convey His word. The angel, as God's representative, demonstrated God at work in this process. The angel presented another option for Joseph related to Mary's condition. God intervened to give Joseph a divinely approved plan.

The angel told Joseph, *don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife*. The law supported Joseph's decision to divorce Mary. But God presented Joseph with the alternative to complete the impending marriage in spite of the pregnancy. This suggestion probably stressed Joseph. His long-held adherence to the law made divorce legally acceptable. What would the religious authorities think if he did not follow a legal solution? What would his family and friends think if he married an already pregnant woman? The angel's words encouraged Joseph not to fear the consequences of marriage to Mary. God approved it.

This unique solution offered by God provides a new perspective on righteousness. Joseph previously fulfilled righteous behavior by doing what the law allowed. If he accepted God's answer to his dilemma, Joseph became righteous in a new way. He discovered God's direction and followed it in spite of the allowances of the law.

The angel revealed the origin of Jesus to Joseph. The child *conceived in her* came through God's active work. This wording indicates that God did the conceiving. No human effort made it happen. This information assured Joseph that Mary had not been unfaithful to him.

The angel addressed Joseph as *son of David*. Joseph came from the lineage of David. Thus when Joseph finalized marriage to Mary, he became Jesus' legal father. This confirmed the genealogy Matthew recorded that the Messiah would come from David's line. By the standards of the Jewish law, Jesus came from the line of David.

VERSE 21

The angel directed Joseph to name the child born to Mary. As the legal father, the task of naming belonged to Joseph. Typically the naming process took place on the eighth day after birth, the day of circumcision for a Jewish male child. Although Joseph declared the name of the child, the actual name originated from God.

The name *Jesus*, Joshua in Hebrew, was common in that day. It means "Yahweh is salvation." The Jews looked for the savior promised by God, but they anticipated a human, political-military leader to save them from Roman domination. Jesus came to *save His people from their sins*. His name explained His work. Matthew's Gospel proceeded to reveal the *how* of that kind of salvation.

VERSE 22

God intended a greater meaning behind the events that took place surrounding the angel's appearance to Joseph and the birth of Jesus. His coming fulfilled God's words *through the prophet*. The citation from Isaiah 7:14 that follows (v. 23) was the first of many Old Testament fulfillment quotations in Matthew. The Gospel writer presented Jesus as the completion of all the Old Testament. The use of prophetic statements helped Matthew explain Jesus' messianic nature and mission. A full discernment of God's revelation of Himself in the Old Testament only occurs in light of Jesus.

VERSE 23

This verse renders Isaiah 7:14. The historical context is important to an understanding of the verse. Isaiah, preaching in the eighth century B.C., addressed King Ahaz of Judah and the Jewish people. Ahaz faced foreign invasion. Isaiah called for him to ask God for help. Instead, Ahaz sought military solutions from advisors and sorcerers. Isaiah saw God as the only hope to ward off certain calamity. The enemies that Ahaz feared would soon diminish if he relied on God instead of failed human solutions.

Isaiah described an event that was ultimately fulfilled in Christ. A *virgin* will *give birth to a son* and name Him *Immanuel*. This name means "God is with us." The child Jesus became "God is with us" to deliver people from sin. Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament. The long-promised Messiah finally showed up, and He was everything God intended Him to be. Trust in Him provides a hope that sustains in light of life's crises.

(In PSG, p. 26) Can you recall a time when you faced a situation in which none of your options seemed good, but God provided a better solution? What is required of you if, like Joseph, you are to receive direction from God in times of trouble or uncertainty?

OBEDIENCE REQUIRED (Matt. 1:24-25)

²⁴ When Joseph got up from sleeping, he did as the Lord's angel had commanded him. He married her ²⁵ but did not know her intimately until she gave birth to a son. And he named Him Jesus.

VERSE 24

Joseph *got up from sleeping*. He had received a clear word from God through the angel. But what would he do with it? He faced a difficult challenge common to every believer. Once you know God's will, are you prepared to follow it? Joseph passed the test. He *did as the Lord's angel had commanded him*.

Through obedience Joseph faced down fear. He stuck with God's plan even though the stigma of negative public opinion loomed over Joseph's head. He obeyed God even though the law gave Joseph an easier option. He found that real righteousness equals doing things God's way.

Joseph demonstrated obedience when *he married her*. The couple completed the final, formal stage of marriage. This means they began to live as husband and wife in the same house. Joseph fulfilled his responsibility as a husband to his wife. In the case of Mary, that meant taking care of her so that she could deliver a child he did not father. It involved making himself available to become Jesus' legal and earthly father. Apparently, Joseph accepted that role humbly and willingly. Obedience often requires the sacrifice of personal preferences in favor of the desires of God. But ultimately God rewards submission to His direction.

VERSE 25

In one area Joseph refrained from his rights as a husband. He *did not know her intimately until she gave birth to a son*. Mary and Joseph abstained from a sexual relationship prior to Jesus' birth. This guarded the status of Mary as a virgin. It left no place for the argument that Joseph impregnated Mary. Some contend that Mary remained a virgin the rest of her life. This position is difficult to defend, since the couple did have other children after Jesus. Sexual intimacy, then, eventually became a natural part of their relationship.

As the Lord intended, Joseph *named Him Jesus* after His birth. This confirmed Joseph's legal adoption of Jesus. It placed Jesus directly in the royal line of David, which fulfilled messianic expectation. Matthew's account leaves no doubt about the association of the name Jesus with the Child conceived by the Holy Spirit in Mary. Jesus, as His name asserts, came to rescue people from sin. Although His ministry involved teaching, preaching, confronting sin, and healing, His ultimate mission was one of saving people from sin. That's work only God can do.

Matthew's Gospel introduced Jesus as both fully human and fully divine and with a unique mission. He was born to a human woman, existed in a human body, and followed in the human line of Jewish royalty. But He was conceived by the Holy Spirit as God's divine Son, given a name that reflected His fulfillment of God's plan, and did the saving work of God.

How do you define obedience to God? What challenges make obedience difficult for you? What do you see as the advantages of obeying God?

KEY DOCTRINE

God the Son

Jesus now dwells in all believers as the living and ever present Lord.

BIBLE SKILL

Use a study Bible or one with cross-references to locate Old Testament passages quoted in the New Testament.

Matthew often quoted Old Testament prophecy to demonstrate ways in which Jesus fulfilled those promises. Although the prophets did not know the exact details or timing of Jesus' coming, they proclaimed God's promise of a future Messiah. Read the following examples where Matthew quoted Old Testament passages to illustrate Jesus' fulfillment of Scripture: Matthew 1:22-23; 12:17-21; 21:4-5. Locate and read in your Bible the Old Testament passages quoted by Matthew. How do these passages speak to Jesus' life and ministry?

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "Messianic Expectations in the First Century," an archive *Biblical Illustrator* article provided on the CD-ROM in the Winter 2015-16 *Explore the Bible: Leader Pack*.