

# ***BaptistWay Press® Premium Commentary***

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## **Studies in *Miracles: The Transforming Power of Jesus***

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Bonus Christmas Lesson

### **The Miracle of the Virgin Birth**

#### ***Focal Text***

Matthew 1:18-25

#### ***Background***

Luke 1:26-38

#### ***Main Idea***

The miracle of Jesus' incarnation reminds us that God specializes in doing the impossible.

#### ***Question to Explore***

In John 3:16, what do the words "only begotten son" mean?

#### ***Quick Read***

There is a continual decline of Christians who believe in the virgin birth. Unbelief is man's greatest problem.

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### **Introduction**

My wife and I have five children—four daughters and a son. Our son was born last. Contrary to what some folks thought, we did not keep having children until we had a boy. It just turned out that way.

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They are all married. They all live near us. We currently have 14 grandchildren and counting. The fact that all five are married, of course, means we have experienced five weddings. This means we are accomplished, veteran nuptial experts. There were some guidelines we adopted with our first daughter's wedding that carried over to the other weddings. We set a budget and tried to stick to it. It was understood, because of my profession, that our weddings would take place at our church. The reception would be there as well.

We tried to be accommodating. Even though each wedding would take place in the same room, we wanted each of our daughter's weddings to be unique. The colors were different. The arrangement of candles and flowers set each ceremony apart from the others. Our 100-voice student choir sang at one of the weddings. All the singers wore black t-shirts with a tuxedo imprint on the front. However, I drew the line on that daughter's dog walking down the aisle as well as refusing to allow another daughter's wedding party to all be barefoot. You have to draw the line somewhere, right?

One reception was formal, with wedding cake and punch. Another was a sugar fest, complete with a chocolate fountain and candy bar. Another reception carried a "smaller than it should be theme." Every food and beverage choice was miniature. And our fourth daughter's reception was held on the church parking lot—a county fair with hot dogs, corn dogs, peanuts, and fried pies. If you are counting, that's only four. We relaxed for the biggest part of our son's wedding—the mother of the bride was in charge, and it was held several hours away at a wedding venue.

All five celebrations had some things in common. We sent out invitations. Actually this included a "Save the Date" announcement to encourage people to put it on their calendar. I wondered if there was going to be a "Save the Date" to "Save the Date," but I refrained from making any sarcastic comments and paid the postage with a smile on my face. All five weddings were part ceremony and part worship service. After all, marriage is a God-approved institution.

In light of my own wedding forty-four years ago, the five weddings of our children, and the hundreds of weddings I have officiated over the years, I have come to a conclusion: Weddings are complicated.

They were complicated in the first century as well. This week's passage (Matthew 1:18-25) is a significant one—it's Christmas. Of all the miracles found in Matthew's Gospel, we cannot overlook the account of Jesus' birth. The circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus include a genealogy, an engagement, and a wedding. The passage also adds another detail—Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit. How much more complicated can things be?

## Commentary

1:18. If your Bible translation has headings, it might say “The Birth of Jesus” at this verse. Such a heading is somewhat misleading—no details are given about his birth. David E. Garland writes:

No details of the birth are forthcoming even in 1:25. It is not a story to be read by the fire on Christmas eve. We have no trip to Bethlehem, no manger, no angels rejoicing, no shepherds looking for a babe in swaddling clothes, nothing to dramatize on Christmas cards.<sup>1</sup>

The literal reading of 1:18 is: “Now the **genealogy** of Jesus Christ was as follows.” The series of “begats” lead the reader to assume it will end with “Joseph begat Jesus.” Instead, it reads: “Jacob was the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, by whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah” (Matthew 1:16). Why this change in pattern? The obvious answer is “Joseph did not begat Jesus as Jacob, his father, begot him; Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus was born of a human mother without the need of a human father. This is the doctrine called the Virgin Birth.

In this passage, Matthew does not attempt to prove the reality of the Virgin Birth. He assumes it. If you harbor any doubts concerning this doctrine, then remember the words of Jesus in Matthew 19:26: “With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” Matthew offers no theories as to how such a thing would occur. He presents it as authentic. So should we.

Matthew tells us Mary was betrothed to Joseph. “Betrothed” is a Jewish wedding term. It was the first stage of marriage, lasting approximately one year. During this year, the couple were considered married but did not live together. The couple were bound by a legally binding contract. This contract could only be broken by a formal process of divorce. The couple were recognized as husband and wife during this stage of engagement. If one of the partners died during the engagement period, the other was considered a widow/widower. At the end of the betrothal period, the marriage was finalized in a formal ceremony. The couple then sexually consummated the marriage. According to Deuteronomy 22:13-21, a bloodstained cloth was proof of the bride’s virginity. So, when Matthew says “before they came together” (1:18), this was a nice way of saying they did not have a sexual relationship.

When Joseph learned Mary was “with child” he assumed she was guilty of adultery. And sexual unfaithfulness during the betrothal period was not tolerated. Adultery carried the penalty of death (Deuteronomy 22:22-24).

1:19. Engagements and weddings were indeed complicated. Joseph now faced a no-win dilemma. It was his right to divorce Mary, but this would subject her to widespread

disgrace and could result in her death. He could not marry her, for to do so would condone what she had done. Matthew tells us Joseph was a righteous man. He had one other option. The Law allowed him to divorce her quietly. He could do this in the presence of only two to three witnesses. This would allow him to save face and would protect Mary's reputation and save her life.

1:20. God can speak to people in any way he sees fit. In these opening verses of Matthew's Gospel, he spoke in dreams. William Hendriksen observes: "Though Joseph has decided on the action he must take, he finds it almost impossible to make the transition from resolve to deed."<sup>3</sup> While Joseph tossed and turned over the dilemma before him, God spoke to him in his sleep.

The angelic messenger imparted information to Joseph that had already been given to Mary: it was by the power of the Holy Spirit, and not in the natural way, that Mary has conceived. The angel encouraged Joseph: "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife." "The one and only obstacle has been removed: Mary has not been unfaithful after all! Joseph can safely take his wife into his home; in fact, he is even directed to do so."<sup>4</sup>

1:21. In those days, the father named the children. Not so, here. He was not to be named after his legal father or other relative as was customary. He was to be given the name "Jesus." This name was popular in the first century. Its Hebrew equivalent is "Joshua." It means "Savior." People expected salvation in the form of a mighty warrior who would crush their enemies. The angel described one who would save the people from their sins.

1:22-23. Matthew takes over the narrative and tells us these details concerning the Virgin Birth were the fulfillment of a prophecy found in Isaiah 7:14. This is the first of 47 Old Testament quotations in Matthew's Gospel.

"BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL," which translated means, "GOD WITH US."

Matthew has a laser focus on prophecies. He refers to the Old Testament being fulfilled in New Testament events twelve times (here, 2:15, 23; 3:15; 4:14; 5:17; 8:17; 12:17; 13:14, 35; 21:4; 27:9).

## **The Isaiah Background**

During the time of Isaiah, Ahaz ruled over the South Kingdom of Judah (735-715 BC). Judah was threatened by an alliance of the King of Israel (Pekah) and the King of Syria (Rezin). This coalition's intent was to destroy Judah. In the midst of this crisis, Isaiah was sent to admonish Ahaz for not placing his trust in God. Isaiah encouraged Ahaz to

ask God for a sign of God's protection and care. Isaiah was trying to tell Ahaz that the attack would never happen.

Ahaz had already turned his back on God for he had entered into an alliance with Assyria. Ahaz refused the offer of a sign from God. In response, Isaiah, in righteous anger, gave Ahaz a sign anyway. He prophesied a woman who was a virgin would give birth to a son named Immanuel. Since neither the queen nor Isaiah's wife were virgins, this might well have been a young woman who served in the royal house. Isaiah's term for "virgin" can also be translated "young woman." Whoever the woman was, by the time her son was old enough to know right from wrong, "the land whose two kings you dread will be forsaken" (Isaiah 7:16). All these things came to pass. The alliance of Israel and Syria was destroyed in 732 BC by Assyria. Israel would fall in 722 BC to the Assyrians as well. Michael J. Wilkins states:

All this was within the time-frame miraculously predicted as the sign to Ahaz, plenty of time for the virgin to be married and to carry the child for the nine months of pregnancy, and for the approximately two years it would take until the boy knew the difference between good and evil. Thus there was immediate fulfillment of a miraculous prediction.<sup>5</sup>

Matthew picked up the Isaiah passage and used a term that can mean only "virgin" and applied it to Mary, Jesus, and Joseph. He looked back to the Old Testament and declared the child Jesus would save the world from sin and death.

Interpreters are divided on the meaning of Matthew's use of Isaiah's prophecy. I believe God gave a sign through Isaiah that was fulfilled in his time when the nation was spared. I believe Isaiah's prophecy looked to the coming of God's Messiah. This prophecy was fulfilled in the Virgin Birth of God's Son—Jesus. Wilkins comments on Isaiah's sign:

It was also a prediction of a future messianic figure who would provide spiritual salvation from sin. Isaiah's sign, in other words, demonstrates both that Immanuel's birth will signal deliverance from invasion for Ahaz and the house of David and that there would be a future messianic deliverer named Immanuel, truly God with us.<sup>6</sup>

1:24-25. Joseph made a perfect score (3 for 3) on obedience to God's commands:

He took Mary as his wife.  
He refrained from sexual relations during her pregnancy.  
He officially named the boy, Jesus.

His dilemma turned out to be the complete fulfillment of prophecy.

## Conclusion

In Matthew's Gospel, the details of Jesus' birth are told from the perspective of Joseph. In Luke's Gospel, we see things through the eyes of Mary. Luke describes the reaction of a young woman who learns she will give birth to God's Messiah. On the other hand, Matthew's focus is on a young man in shock as he reacts to terrible news. The words of God's angelic messengers are delivered to both of them: "Don't be afraid" (Matthew 1:20 and Luke 1:30).

Yet, for some reason, some are afraid, or perhaps skeptical, of the doctrine of the Virgin Birth. For centuries, opponents of Christianity have scoffed at the notion of the miraculous. N. T. Wright accurately describes the mindset of such skeptics. "Remarkable healings, perhaps; there are ways of explaining them. But not babies born without human fathers. This is straining things too far."<sup>7</sup>

Some interpreters are more disparaging in their criticism. They say the notion of the Virgin Birth has given rise to the legend Mary stayed a virgin forever and this story gives the impression God views sex as immoral and wrong. Yet, Matthew clearly states in delicate language that Mary and Joseph were sexually abstinent until Jesus was born. Abstinence maintained Joseph and Mary's ritual purification during the pregnancy as well as ensured Jesus was virgin-born. But this is not a hint of continued celibacy after Jesus' birth. The word "until" most naturally means Mary and Joseph had normal marital sexual relations after Jesus' birth, from which other children were born.<sup>8</sup> Doubtless, this doctrine does lend itself to misunderstandings. In the centuries before Jesus, there were plenty of stories where heroes were conceived by a god. Wright comments:

Surely Matthew, with his very Jewish perspective on everything, would hardly invent such a thing, or copy it from someone else unless he really believed it? Wouldn't it be opening Christianity to the sneers of its opponents, who would quickly suggest the obvious alternative, namely that Mary had become pregnant through some more obvious but less reputable means?<sup>9</sup>

In John 8:41, there is a taunt made concerning Jesus' birth when he was addressing a crowd of Jews: "You are doing the deeds of your father." They said to him, "We were not born of fornication; we have one Father: God." It appears Matthew and Luke carefully recounted the miracle of Jesus' birth to set the record straight.

Throughout this series of lessons on the miracles in Matthew, I have relied heavily upon the scholarship of William Barclay. His writing style is captivating. His interpretation of Scripture opens the eyes of those who read his commentaries. But he does not accept the doctrine of the Virgin Birth in its literal and physical sense. He comments on the meaning of Matthew 1:20:

What it stresses is not so much that Jesus was born of a woman who was a virgin, as that the birth of Jesus is the work of the Holy Spirit.... What then does it mean to say that in the birth of Jesus the Holy Spirit of God was specially operative? Let us leave aside all the doubtful and debatable things, and concentrate on that great truth, as Matthew would wish us to do.<sup>10</sup>

Though I appreciate Barclay's candor, I must agree to disagree with him on the validity and significance of what I deem to be a miracle of the Holy Spirit—that Jesus was conceived in the womb of Mary, a virgin.

I see the Virgin Birth as significant because—

*It speaks of one person who is fully God and fully human.* “Jesus is enabled to carry the sins of the world to the cross only because his divine nature is infinitely capable to sustain his humanity.”<sup>11</sup>

*It signals Jesus' true humanity without inherited sin.* Through the powerful work of the Holy Spirit overshadowing Mary in the conception of Jesus, the unbroken line of the descent of sin was interrupted, so that Jesus was born holy.<sup>12</sup>

*It is the unique, miraculous event by which Jesus, the sinless Savior, came into the world to save his people from their sins.* This is the beginning of the primary story line of this Gospel. Yet, the narrative of the virgin birth is also the beginning stage by which the Immanuel, God with us, becomes the pattern for the kind of transforming life he will produce in all who believe in him.

As stated above, engagements, weddings, and bearing children can be complicated. Customs and expectations can change. In the case of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus, complications, stress, and misunderstandings were the rule, not the exception. But at the end of the day (or end of the pregnancy), two things are abundantly clear:

1. His name is Jesus—because he is the Savior of the World.
2. He is Immanuel—because of the virgin birth he truly is God with us.

Merry Christmas

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### **Meet the Writer: Dr. Stephen G. Hatfield**

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<sup>1</sup>David E. Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), 20-21.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, 21.

<sup>3</sup>William Hendriksen, “The Gospel of Matthew” *New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973), 131.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew*, The Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 13.

<sup>6</sup>Michael J. Wilkins, *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2004), 81.

<sup>7</sup>N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone Part One* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 6.

<sup>8</sup>Wilkins, 82.

<sup>9</sup>Wright, 6.

<sup>10</sup>William Barclay, “The Gospel of Matthew” *Daily Bible Study Series Volume 1*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 20.

<sup>11</sup>Wilkins, 86.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.