

## Matthew 1:18-25 Christmas Beyond Reason

The Word of the Lord from Matthew 1:20-21: 'But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.' This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

### **I. The Word of the Lord to Joseph**

If the angel doesn't speak, what kind of Christmas will Joseph have?

Everything has been going according to plan. Joseph is betrothed to Mary, and the wedding day is coming. They're upstanding citizens: they've been keeping the rules and Mary's virginity intact. At least, until now. Now Mary is, um, "found to be with child," as Matthew put it. It's like she just woke up one morning, and discovered she was pregnant through no fault of her own. Actually, her explanation is even less believable: she claims that an angel appeared, spoke God's powerful life-conceiving Word, and now she's going to give birth to the Son of God. It's enough to make a shaken Joseph shake his head even more: give Mary high marks for creativity, but not for fidelity.

So what is Joseph to do? Betrayals like this often turn out badly in history with violence and bloodshed; and if Joseph were a proud or bitter man, he could drag Mary through the courts on a charge of adultery and maybe get her stoned to death at the end of it. But he's not a man of bitterness or pride. The text says he is just: he wants to do the right thing. The right thing isn't revenge. The right thing is to end the betrothal, get a quiet divorce and get on with his life. If she loves another man that much, she ought to be with him. Joseph can lick his wounds and try to restore his dignity. That's the right thing to do. It's the just thing to do. The Law says so, and that's what God has given His people to live by. That's what Joseph has to work with.

But for Joseph, the Lord is going to give some additional information. An angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream and says, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."

That makes things simple for Joseph: the Lord has told him the path to take. But simple is not the same as easy. Joseph is a just man, and he's going to do what the Lord has told him to do. But by doing so, it's going to look like the just man isn't just anymore. It's not that he'll appear unjust in the sense of being cruel, but unjust in the sense that it will look like he's gullible, foolish and soft on crime, so to speak. By taking Mary to be his wife, he's inviting the sneers and the gossip that will never go away. He'll always look like the cuckolded fool of a husband, even though he knew better before he got married. See, Mary has been away for 3 months at the home of Elizabeth and Zachariah, and when she returns, she's pregnant. Clearly the father of the child is not Joseph—and everybody knows it. If the guy lives on his dignity and pride, what others think of him is going to gnaw at him for the rest of his life, even though he knows that Mary is innocent. In a world where respect and reputation are important, this could be a killer.

But there are two words in the angel's proclamation that preach a whole new message, two names: "Immanuel" and "Jesus." "Immanuel:" literally, "God with us." The child in Mary's womb is the Son of God. "Jesus:" literally, "Yahweh saves." God is coming to earth in human flesh to be the Savior of the world. He's going to be born and grow and live just like everybody else. He's going to be crucified for everybody else. Then He's going to rise again on the third day to give eternal life to all who believe in Him.

So no matter how scandalous it all looks to the world, Mary is highly favored by God: He has chosen her as His instrument to be born into the world. Furthermore, Joseph is favored, too: no matter how others may sneer at appearances, the Lord has chosen him to be the father-figure on earth for the Son of God. He's entrusted with the task of protecting and providing for mother and Child. He isn't obligated: the angel doesn't say, "You have to." The angel says, "Do not be afraid to." Joseph is set free to be husband to Mary and stepfather of God's Son. He's set free from the opinions and expectations of sinners. He's even set free from doing the right thing according to

the Law, because Mary isn't guilty of what appears to be; instead, he's set free to do what God calls him to do, because the Savior comes to set him free from sin.

So behold these two miracles of Christmas: through an angel, the Lord speaks His Word to Mary and the Savior becomes flesh; and through an angel, the Lord speaks His Word to Joseph so that he might believe in the Savior.

## **II. The Word of the Lord to You**

This Word of the Lord is not lost. We gather here to proclaim with angels, "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord." The Babe born of Mary is in fact conceived by the Holy Ghost. He is Immanuel, God with us to save us from our sins. He is Jesus: God spoke His Word to Mary so that your Savior might be born. And as He spoke to Joseph, God speaks His Word to you so that you might believe in the Savior.

But if the Lord does not speak of the miracle of the Incarnation—if all you have to go on are appearances, then what kind of Christmas are **you** left with? You see a poor couple in a stable, and you know that there's a big question about the Baby's paternity: so you see that Joseph is a super-nice guy, and you figure that you should be kind, too. You see shepherds show up and rejoice, so you figure that you should be joyful. You see wise men show up eventually with gifts, and you figure you should be nice to other people—perhaps especially those who are less fortunate than you. If you go by what you see, then the message of Christmas is be kind, be joyful and be nice. You should be nice, and that means you shouldn't be naughty. After all, naughty people get punished—even with prison, if they're criminally naughty enough. Therefore, it only makes sense that people who are nice get rewarded at Christmas, and people who are naughty don't.

So if the Lord doesn't speak, then the message of Christmas is be kind, be joyful and be nice. The scene you see in Bethlehem is one example; but if it is just an example, it need not be the only one. Other Christmas stories without Jesus can be about kindness, joy and niceness. Why, you can emphasize a man who rides in from the north and rewards the nice while filling the socks of the naughty with environmentally hazardous energy resources: he teaches the same lesson. So does Jimmy Stewart and Charles Dickens. So does Rudolph and Frosty. All of these speak of being nice, but none speak of salvation.

If God doesn't speak, then you get what the world makes Christmas to be: be nice, be joyful, be kind. It's not a wrong message. It's a message to do the right thing. It's the same material that Joseph had to work with before the angel came: be nice and kind to Mary, even if you can't be joyful. It's not a wrong message. But it's not a saving message. And, if you're in the shoes of Joseph where life is looking ugly at the moment, then a bunch of people telling you to be nice and joyful is only going to make you feel worse, on the outside of a merry Christmas looking in.

But the Lord speaks. As He spoke to give comfort, faith and salvation to Joseph, He speaks to give comfort, faith and salvation to you. He says things like He said in our epistle lesson: "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent His only Son into the world, so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:9-10). God speaks, and Christmas changes radically. This is not, first and foremost, a holiday about you being nice to each other, but of God being more than nice to you. God makes His love manifest by sending His only Son into the world so that you might have life—eternal life. He sends His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. The sinless Babe of Bethlehem doesn't stay in the manger: He grows up and goes to the cross to die in the place of sinners—to die in your place. That's why you can sing that Christ, your Savior is born.

God speaks, and now you know. Christmas is God's labor of love for you. He is born into time so that you might have eternity. He becomes flesh so that you might be raised up, body and all, on the Last Day. He comes to die so that you might live. God speaks, and Christmas is so much more.

And because God loves you so, now you are set free. That's why our epistle then says, "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (1 John 4:11). Like Joseph, you're now set

free—not just to do the right thing according to the Law, but to do the loving thing in service to your neighbor.

You're set free from the scorn of the world. The world still scorns virginity and family and marriage and stay-at-home moms and kids who obey their parents: it's the rebels and celebrities who get to be on TMZ. But you don't get your worth from what the world says about you—you get it from Christ, who gives you great worth by taking on flesh and paying for your life with His own blood.

You're set free from pride. Pride is always a dangerous thing. Pride would make Joseph do everything he could legally do to punish Mary; but set free from pride, he does what is best for her. Sinful pride demands satisfaction, and it ultimately eats you alive. You're set free from pride: you're set free to forgive. Rather than seek to exact as much vengeance from others as you legally can, you're set free to do what is loving—even for those who have hurt you. You're set free because Christ has done exactly that for you.

You're set free from fear—the fear that giving to others means less for you, or the fear that doing the right thing will damage your reputation. You're set free from the fear that being a follower of Jesus will hurt, even if the world wants to point fingers and laugh. You're free from despair if this holiday season isn't one of the merriment that the world says it should be. You're free because you know that God the Father looks upon you with favor; and He points at you to say, "You are My beloved child. For the sake of Jesus, I am well pleased with you. For His sake, you're going to live forever."

Do you see? By what you see, it's reasonable to say that Christmas is about things like kindness and joy. But then God speaks, and you see that it is that and so much more. It's Christmas beyond reason because the Lord reveals His Gospel. Before your love for others comes His love for you: not some abstract warm fuzzy feeling, but a love so concrete and material and present that it has flesh and blood, fingers and toes, and a will to go to the cross, die in your place, then rise again so that He might raise you.

What kind of Christmas do you have if God doesn't speak. You could still have a good one, a merry one. But you couldn't have a miraculous one. But God speaks; and the Gospel God proclaims makes the good better, and even gives hope during the bad. For the sake of Mary's Son, God has grace and peace for you.

A blessed Christmas to you all, for Christ your Savior is born; and so you are forgiven for all of your sins. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen