

Christmas-JosephMaryScandal 20-12-20b

Let's continue our study now in the first chapter of Matthew and we have seen that fulfilling the plan of God, and in this case the central feature of God's entire plan for the human race did not radiate blessing and fulsome prosperity and joy to the central characters by any means. We've seen that, first of all, the news is delivered to a couple who are in the betrothal phase of marriage. There would have been no questions if the marriage had been consummated, if they were already living together.

Maybe the angel came and said, Joseph, yes, Mary is your wife, but do not have the honeymoon tonight. Have the feast and all the rest of it, but do not know your wife because she's going to get pregnant from the Holy Spirit. But when she begins to show and is obviously pregnant and has the child, everyone would assume that it's Joseph's, but we really know that it's of the Holy Spirit, but God doesn't do that.

God has Mary get pregnant at an extremely awkward time. She has a husband who can care for her during the pregnancy and birth, which she would not have had if God had just said, well, the virgin will conceive and bear a child and she's got no husband. Then the onus would have been on her father because everyone would assume that he had failed to secure his household and failed to guarantee the chastity of his daughter and you're back to the stoning on the doorstep idea.

But this weird one year period of betrothal is when God chooses to have the conception of Jesus take place and it faces Joseph with a tremendous challenge. And as we saw, he is personally assured in his own heart because he's thinking about these things in verse 20 of chapter one of Matthew, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. So he's asleep.

This is not the same as Zachariah in the holy place. This is not the same as Mary in her father's house with Gabriel walking in the door. Joseph gets this in a dream.

Now, why is that? Why doesn't Gabriel walk in and talk to him in daylight? What's the man's name? What's his namesake most famous for in Genesis, the Joseph of Genesis? He's all about dreams. He has dreams. He interprets dreams, right? So one of the subtle guarantees that this isn't something Joseph ate the night before that disagreed with him and gave him strange visions in the night is the method chosen harks back to the method God used to communicate with his namesake, Joseph, the son of Jacob.

God gives us assurances when we are sensitive to them, when we are looking for them. He will accompany the truth of his word with those things that help us to know that it is from him. So it is in a dream of all the possible forms of revelation, Joseph gets it in a dream.

Do not be afraid to take to you Mary, your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. So in verse 24, Joseph being aroused from sleep did as the angel of the Lord commanded following the commands of God is the key to success. When we have a clear command, that's

what we do.

He did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took to him his wife. Now, how did this work? She becomes pregnant during the betrothal period and it is visible enough that he is thinking about what he's going to do, but evidently this is very close to the time that the wedding is scheduled. Do you remember how weddings worked? Think of the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, the bridesmaids, if you will, that are waiting outside.

They're really sort of groomsmen. They are waiting outside the house that the groom has constructed and they're going to sort of dedicate the house. They're going to have a house warming with this celebratory feast.

And so the groom has gone to fetch his bride and returns when the virgins are there and they're supposed to light the way and be a part of the festivities at the home. And so Joseph must have been very close to the end of the year betrothal period because when it says he took to him his wife, this seems to be very shortly after the revelation from the angel in the dream. And he took her to him.

Now think about what people are going to assume. People know how to count. They know the gestation period for human babies is nine months.

If he takes to her his wife and she is giving birth to a child well before nine months after the wise and foolish virgin night, i.e. the wedding and consummation and honeymoon, and she's giving birth a few months later, which is several months early, what are the possibilities? A, if you inquire and if you are someone that Mary and Joseph think can be trusted with the truth, you're told the child was conceived by the Holy Spirit. B, Mary had a dalliance with somebody during the betrothal period and we don't know who that is. The longstanding unkind speculation is that a Roman soldier sneaked in there.

The third and most probable assumption in the community is that Joseph himself jumped the gun and didn't wait for the full year to be with his betrothed. And this is probably the default understanding. What does that do to Joseph's reputation as a righteous man, dedicated to the law, respected in the community, rightly viewed as a righteous man, but now it turns out that his wife got pregnant before the marriage was consummated, meaning the betrothal period was violated.

He just has to bear that social shame, right? And he does so. He does what the angel tells him. This is God's command.

That's what he does. But it costs him something. It costs him pride of standing.

What was the big problem for the Pharisees and the other religious leaders, the elders and chief priests and scribes in Jesus' day? They were so intent upon being seen in the community as righteous. They would stand on street corners and make long prayers. They would hold up the bag of coins that they were about to drop into the temple treasury to be sure everyone

could see it.

They tithed the spices in their cabinet. They went to excessive lengths to elaborate every detail of the law and disparage anyone who didn't follow all of their additions and interpretations of it. They're all about the righteousness of the law.

Joseph quietly takes Mary to himself, knowing that he is going to be thought of as immoral, as unfaithful to what in essence was an addition to the law. Do you see anywhere in the law of Moses that says anything about this is how marriage will work? You will get betrothed one year ahead of time. You will go and build a house.

You will come back a year later, and that's when the marriage will be consummated. This marriage, then as now, is largely built of human tradition, isn't it? The law does not specifically address what is and isn't proper during the betrothal period. This is what has become custom, but it's not codified in the law.

So Joseph pretty much just has to let people assume what they are going to assume. He knows the truth. Mary knows the truth.

Probably an inner circle of family members and mature believers in the Old Testament sense are willing to accept their testimony to the Word of God. But community at large, there's going to be a lot of looking askance. There may be people who don't want to serve them or don't want to have them in their establishment or don't want to use Joseph for stonemason work or for tecton work.

Maybe they look upon Jesus as illegitimate in some sense. And this is going to go on for years. The clouds of doubt and scandal surrounding the birth of the Lord Jesus.

Now, speaking of the birth of the Lord Jesus, let me ask you this. I don't know if you ever thought about this or not. Why was Jesus born at all? Why was he born at all? Angels descend from heaven and suddenly appear and start walking around.

Angels came down and ate a meal with Abraham on the occasion where Sarah laughed. And then they go on to survey the city of Sodom. And I will not hide from Abram what I'm about to do.

Why did God not simply send his son as a 30-year-old man walking in from 40 days of temptation in the wilderness? And here he is. Is there not biblical precedent for that? The book of Hebrews talks about the high priesthood of the Lord Jesus and says he is a priest after the order of Melchizedek. Melchizedek, who has no ancestry or parentage or line of birth mentioned in Scripture.

Melchizedek just seems to appear. And his origins are omitted from Scripture. He just simply appears in the story as a priest with whom Abraham shares bread and wine.

Why didn't Jesus just appear that way? Why didn't he descend in a cloud of glory just as he will later ascend in a cloud of glory, be taken up out of their sight? Why didn't he just descend? Why the birth? We do not have a high priest who is unaware of our struggles and our trials. He was tested in all points like as we are, the author of Hebrews tells us. And that includes childhood.

That includes coming to maturity. It includes being under the authority of parents and learning to submit. It says he learned obedience through the things that he suffered and that's from birth.

As a young child, as an intermediate age child, when he reached the age of bar mitzvah and was ready to enter into the community. Where is Jesus at the age of bar mitzvah? We have the story when his parents go to Jerusalem and are leaving and they look around and he's not in the caravan and they have to go back and find him. And at the age of 12, he is conversing with other adult members of the community at the temple, right? All of this growing up and the stresses and the challenges and the tests that are involved are a part.

So when you think, why was Jesus born? That's one of the reasons. Tested in all points. Many people carry baggage from childhood into adult years and therapists try to go in and get you to do a primal scream or confess the sins of your parents so that you can feel better about yourself and so on.

Well, youth, childhood are a part of our human experience and Jesus went through the very same thing all the rest of us do. Secondly, Joseph, son of David, the angel says. We have the genealogy, the legal adoptive genealogy, if you will, given in Matthew chapter 1. And if you remember in the beginning when it says Jesus is son of David, son of Abraham, and it begins in verse 2 of chapter 1 with Abram, Isaac, Jacob, Judah and his brothers, Judah, Perez, Zerah, Hezron, Ram and so on.

You come down to verse 6, Jesse begot David the king. David the king begot Solomon by her of Uriah. So this line comes down through Shlomo and through Solomon, Rehoboam, Abijah, Asa, Jehoshaphat, Joram, Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah.

We have a lot of narrative about the reign of Hezekiah. We get it in three different places. We get Kings, Chronicles and Isaiah for the reign of Hezekiah.

Hezekiah begot Manasseh. What do we know about Manasseh? God says captivity and judgment are coming because of the sins of Manasseh. He is among the most wicked kings that ever was.

Manasseh begots Ammon. Ammon begot Josiah, good King Josiah. At least he was good for a while.

Josiah begot Jeconiah and his brothers about the time they were carried away to Babylon. This is significant because Jeconiah, you may remember him by his more familiar name, Jehoiachin, is the subject of a curse from the Lord which we find in Jeremiah chapter 22. This is the line of

the kings of Judah.

Ahab, of course, was in the northern kingdom as a wicked king. Jezebel, his wife, and Athaliah, their daughter, who comes down to Judah and wreaks all kinds of havoc and slays babies and whatnot. But Manasseh and later Jehoiachin, these are kings in the southern kingdom of Judah.

They reign from Jerusalem. And Jehoiachin is the king of Judah who is reigning when the people are deported to Babylon. The curse on Jeconiah is found in Jeremiah chapter 22, verse 24.

God says the king is like a signet ring on his hand, and he's going to pull that ring off. He's going to disavow Jehoiachin, Jeconiah. God says, record this man as if childless.

Record Jeconiah as if childless. A man who will not prosper in his lifetime, for none of his offspring will prosper. None will sit on the throne of David or rule anymore in Judah.

Joseph is a direct descendant of Jehoiachin, Jeconiah. That's why we find Jeconiah mentioned in verse 11, about the time they were carried away to Babylon. And that is the time at which Jeremiah, who is of course alive at the time, pronounces this curse from God on Jeconiah and his line.

So you have the rest of the line given until verse 16, Jacob begot Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Mary, of whom was born Jesus Christ. But Joseph is the adoptive or legal father, but not the biological father. And it is a fulfillment of the Jeconiah curse.

Now, if you're Joseph and you say, well, I wasn't there when all of my ancestors did this and did that. How am I responsible for my great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great granddaddy Manasseh and later on Jehoiachin? I'm a righteous man. I'm obedient.

And yet there is a circumstance in his life that is of a hereditary nature, and it is part of the challenge. And Joseph has to understand and recognize that there is a reason why God uses him and his ancestry despite the curse. Joseph, what an extraordinary individual.

We often understand and recognize how amazing Mary was. But Joseph, submissive, obedient, righteous, well-informed, recognizes the truth of God when he sees it and when he hears it, and he obeys it. He applies it.

He does exactly what he is told to do all through this story. Every single time Joseph gets guidance from God, he follows it to the letter. You cannot find a single bad thing that Joseph, the husband of Mary, ever does.

He is as righteous during and after this episode as he was before it. It's one of the reasons God chose him. So this arranged marriage is disrupted by this, to humanize, inexplicable pregnancy, creates scandal, creates a challenge.

People either have to believe the witness of Mary and Joseph, those who are close to them and our family and so on, close relatives, demand an explanation, and they say, well, this is what

God has told me. Those people face a decision. I know these people.

Are they faithful witnesses? Are they liars? Do I accept their testimony? Joseph, someone who loves mercy more than fulfilling the letter of the law or shielding his own reputation or his standing in the community, he could have put on a big protestation and condemned Mary publicly and potentially even had her executed, and socially he would have been unscathed. He's the wronged party. The fact that he does not do any of that casts great suspicions on him as the probable father of the child having broken the betrothal period.

He is a workman, a tecton, who does not need to be ashamed. Society may shame him, and he makes a choice. Do I want to be approved by men or do I want to be approved by God? He is a tecton that does not need to be ashamed.

The angel says, call his name Yeshua or Joshua, meaning the first part of that Yehoshua, Yeshua. The first part is the divine name, Yahweh. And Yeshua is the verb that means to deliver, to save, to rescue.

The Lord is the savior. Lord, savior are the two parts of that name. The salvation of his people is embodied in his very name.

The birth takes place in Bethlehem, and this is significant because it is the city of David. It was an insignificant little burg. It reminds me of one time I was traveling and saw a sign with a fellow midshipman and we were driving across the country and there was a little sign to a national park that said, this is the birthplace of Benjamin Harrison.

You want to talk about an insignificant cabin out in the middle of nowhere. We drove for about 20 minutes into this park, finally found this little one room cabin, birthplace of Benjamin Harrison. And anytime I think about the insignificance of Bethlehem, I think about Benjamin Harrison was a president, but they didn't build a presidential library at his birthplace.

It's just a little log cabin. It was the least among towns. And of course you remember the prophecy in Micah chapter five, verse two, and it is emblematic.

Mary and Joseph are seemingly insignificant people. Joseph's a workman. He's a blue collar guy.

He's not from a well-off family. Mary is evidently related to a priestly line, perhaps by marriage. She's descended from David, which is the tribe of Judah, but her cousin Elizabeth and cousin-in-law Zechariah are from the tribe of Levi.

And they seem to be intermarried with and closely associated with the Levites. But she's not well-off. She's not a young woman of any note.

And the town where Jesus is born, although it is the town of David, the city of David, city is really a misnomer. It was the village of David. It was the extremely small town.

It was the bushy head Oklahoma of Judea. Yet it fulfills prophecy, and those who knew the word

of God didn't look at it in terms of its human insignificance. They looked at it in terms of its divine significance, based on Micah 5.2. We've already covered, and I'll go lightly over this point, that the whole nativity scene tradition that we have is off in a number of respects.

Jesus wasn't born in a stable. There wasn't an inn or an innkeeper wagging his finger and saying no room. There is no word for stable or innkeeper, as you know.

The word translated inn, when it says no room at the inn, is a word that means guest chamber, which in the houses of the day, the larger houses, was usually an upper room. And you get the idea that the place where they were to stay was full of other relatives who had previously arrived and were bunking. You know how you do when people are in sleeping bags and cots and so on, and some are in the living room, and a place is pretty full.

But the word translated inn actually means guest chamber, and it's not a hotel or a motel or an inn where strangers come and buy a room. In fact, this word is the same word used in Luke 22.12 for the upper room where Jesus ate the last supper, the upper room, same word. So the upper room at this home was full.

It's possible that the relatives had heard of the scandal. It's possible that as Mary and Joseph arrive at the home and are in the outer courtyard, and she is nine months pregnant, people say, you know, we're full. We certainly don't have a room we can clear out for you to go through the birth, which looks like it's going to happen at virtually any moment.

And you will recall what we've studied about where they went because that home had no room. They went to the place where shepherds raised lambs and had the quote-unquote swaddling clothes and the manger and the rest of it. This was the tower, the place of the tower, just on the outskirts of Bethlehem where the sacrificial lambs were born, raised, examined, inspected, and supplied for sacrifice, the morning and evening offering at the temple.

This is where they came from, and that's where Jesus was born. He is our Passover. John identifies him first as the Lamb of God, and he comes from the very same place as those sacrificial lambs.

That's where they go. It seems like a hardship. It seems like a huge inconvenience.

You've got a nine-months-pregnant wife, and the place where you are scheduled to stay turns you away for whatever reason or pretext. You could imagine Joseph raising his eyes to heaven and saying, Lord, what now? How much more difficult can this get? And yet in the larger plan of God, the symbolic value and the communication value of where Jesus is going to be born and where the shepherds are going to find him is going to be recorded in the eternal pages of the Word of God. Joseph has no way of knowing this.

An angel hasn't come and said, well, you know, you really might just proceed to the tower and wait for the shepherds. He's doing this on faith. He trusts that God knows what he's doing, and whatever hardships and difficulties he's encountering are serving a greater purpose in the plan

of God.

God knows things that Joseph doesn't know. When God reveals what Joseph is to do, he obeys in faith. So, of course, you also remember that the magi do not come on this night.

We've talked about the shepherds at length. What great guys, those shepherds. You can imagine how much they would have had in common with Joseph.

You know, the men are probably standing at a respectful distance and talking with Joseph. He's a workman. They are shepherds.

None of them are highfalutin, middle or upper class, and they are all amazed. They've all spoken with angels, comparing notes on the Bible class they've gotten from angels, from messengers, from God. And what a great night you could imagine that to be.

It is much later. By the time the wise men arrive, they saw the star in the east, had to pack, had to provide, had to assemble a caravan and travel the distance from the ancient Persian location where they originate all the way to Israel, go to Jerusalem and inquire, and then are directed to Bethlehem by the star. It is likely that they traveled over a thousand miles.

This was no small thing in those days. A thousand miles by caravan. There's no indication that there were three of them.

The number three is based entirely on the number of gifts that are mentioned. But there were any number of wise men. I suspect that this was a much larger group.

You need to set up two different nativity scenes. One was shepherds and a manger, and it really ought to be at the base of a tower. The other should be a house with rooms, standard living accommodations, and the wise men appearing to see a child who is between one and two years of age, probably walking.

I think if Jesus could walk on water, he could probably walk at a pretty early age. But in Matthew 2, verse 11, if you're still in Matthew, just check it out. When they had come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary, not the baby, not the infant, not the brephos.

He's a young child. They fell down and worshiped him. When they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to him, gold, frankincense, and myrrh, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod.

They departed for their own country another way. We know that Joseph and Mary were not well off because at the dedication, eight days after the birth, the sacrifice was normally a lamb. You would think having just been at the tower with the shepherds and lambs, someone could have donated them a lamb, they could have brought a lamb, and that would have been a wonderful picture perhaps at the dedication, but they don't bring a lamb.

If you look at Leviticus chapter 12, verses six through eight, it allows those who can't afford a

lamb, can't bring a lamb, can bring a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons. This is the sacrifice that the poor can afford and bring, and that's what they bring. You can imagine all of the propriety and symbolism in a lamb, but it's not.

It's two young pigeons. Why? Once again, God has a purpose in circumstance. God could have easily made both families extremely well off.

God could have had both families in Bethlehem instead of up in the Nazareth area. Many things God could have done. God could have had Jesus descend from the skies at the age of 30 to begin his earthly ministry and skip all of this and the hardship and the difficulty that it creates for Joseph and Mary, but in those difficulties and in those hardships, God accomplishes his purpose.

God reveals his character and his grace and his provision and his preparation of the Lord Jesus to be the perfect lamb offered for the sins of the world. I don't have time to continue talking about the scourge when Herod finds out that the wise men have left a different direction, and he says he believes that if this child is considered to be or has been born king of the Jews, he needs to destroy him, and you have that purge in the area of the children two years old and under, and Joseph is... When they had departed, so notice this isn't the baby Jesus now. This is after the wise men have departed, and Jesus is anywhere from a year to two years old.

The Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. This is verse 13 of chapter 2 saying, Arise, take the young child and his mother. Flee to Egypt and stay there until I bring you word, for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him.

Many things God could have done here. The soldiers who come to town could have been blinded and feeling around like the perverts who tried to enter Lot's home. They could have been blinded and led away like the prophet does when they come and try to take him.

There could have been a glory that just produced a wall of fire around the home. They could have just not been discovered. God says take him to Egypt.

This is a hardship. They're not well-off people, and if you think coming from Nazareth down to Bethlehem was a journey, think about having to leave Bethlehem and go all the way down to Egypt where, as far as we know, Mary and Joseph know no one. That is a hard trip to a hard destination.

They've got a small child. He's got to pack up and leave everything he's got. How is he going to make a living? Is he going to follow in the footsteps of his ancient fathers and be a workman in construction the way the Israelites were before God delivered them? Is he coming full circle and going back to virtual bondage in Egypt? Well, in a way, yes, and it's a part of the plan of God.

Joseph's obedience in taking his family to Egypt is a hard thing, but so essential to God's higher purpose that it might be fulfilled. Out of Egypt I called my son. Finally, this is a wonderful time of year, and it's great.

I have no problem celebrating and commemorating the coming of the Lord Jesus into the earth. We need to do it sometime, although there's no indication that Jesus celebrated his birthday or the disciples or the early church. This is something the Catholic church sort of invented because they didn't like all the pagan celebrations at the winter solstice, which is December 21st and thereabouts, and so the Catholics said we're going to... There's a thing called a palimpsest where you have a document and the paper it's written on, the parchment it's written on is more valuable than what's written, and so they just scrub off the letters and overwrite what you really want onto this piece of parchment, and that new document over the old is called a palimpsest, and the Catholics wanted to stamp over this pagan holiday.

Just like Easter, they wanted to stamp over the whole Easter comes from Esther and that deal, so they're trying to replace with Christian celebrations these pagan things, and so they picked December 25th. They picked it. It's not in the Bible.

Christmas is not in the Bible. Christmas is not in the early church. It's not Jesus and his disciples.

We don't know that the people in that day celebrated birthdays at all the way we do, and because shepherds were abiding in the field keeping watch over their flocks, shepherds don't keep watch over their flocks in the field in the dead of winter. That's a springtime function, and based on that understanding and some other things in the Old Testament about the former and latter rains that come in the spring and in the early fall and Jesus' first advent is pictured in the spring feasts and his second coming is pictured in the fall feasts. Jesus was born in the spring, not in December.

Just so you know, the exact day is unknown, and it wasn't until the A.D. 300s, the fourth century, that December 25th became associated with the birth of Jesus wrought by the Roman Catholic Church. So in summary, as we think about the birth of Christ, remembering that it is probably to be commemorated some months hence when the day spring from on high appears and the morning star rises in our hearts, it's significant that Jesus was born in the spring because that is the time of new birth, new hope, new growth, new opportunity. You've made it through a long, hard time, and the birth of Jesus and the childhood of Jesus were hard times.

These people blessed with the privilege of being his parents went through enormous hardship. It wasn't an unqualified blessing to be the parents of the Savior and Messiah to Israel. It was a lot of work, a lot of hardship, a lot of scandal, a lot of moving around, a lot of uncertainty, a lot of danger, a lot of reliance on God that he is working these things together for good.

Such is our life. Such is our example. Such is our hope and our inspiration to trust God the way Joseph did, to understand that God knows what he's doing.

And you can imagine the blessing and reward that await Joseph and Mary in the kingdoms that are to come because of their faithfulness and their obedience that are a part of God's working out of salvation, not just for the people of Israel, which is all Mary and Joseph could have hoped to understand, but the entire world. Salvation to the Gentiles, a mystery that will not be

revealed for some decades until the Apostle Paul is entrusted with it to communicate it and to share it and spread it across the world. So in this holiday season, when things get a little rough around the edges and there are challenges, and when the season is over and we return, as it were, to our many challenges, both internal and external, think of Joseph.

Think of his faithfulness and his obedience because he was experienced in recognizing and practicing righteousness, experienced in recognizing and believing the truth of the Word of God. We'll close here in a word of prayer. Father, we thank you for the many wonderful examples of faith and obedience we have in Scripture, the challenges that those who have gone before us have faced, but by your grace and in your strength have become overcomers.

Our goal is to follow the exhortation of your Son, the Lord Jesus, to be overcomers, to enter into those promises and those future opportunities that are ours by grace through faith in your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. We thank you for these things and we pray that we can remember them, that God the Holy Spirit will bring them to our hearts in the days ahead. We pray it in Jesus' name, Amen.