

The Birth of Christ
Matthew 1:18-25
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- I. The Person of the Christ (1:1-4:11)
 - A. The Incarnation of the Christ (1:1-2:23)
 - 1. The Genealogy of the Christ (1:1-17)
 - 2. The Birth of Christ (1:18-25)

The most remarkable uniqueness about the birth of Jesus is that this child was conceived from the Holy Spirit. This is the big idea of Matthew 1:18-25. This was necessary for prophetic reasons and for theological reasons.

If Jesus Christ was to become the perfect sacrifice for sin, He must be without sin. “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (1 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus Christ knew no sin not only because He did not sin, but also because he was not sinful. We are born with the stain of original sin, also known as inherited sin or the sinful nature, as a result of the sinful state when we were born.

Psalm 51:5 indicates that this sinful state is inherited upon conception, “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me.” Therefore, we gained our sinful nature for we “were by nature children of wrath” (Ephesians 2:3). In order for Jesus to be without sin, His very conception must have been supernatural. Otherwise He would have inherited the sinful nature.

Furthermore, Christ’s virgin birth was necessary in order to avoid the stain of imputed sin. Romans 5:12 states, “Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned.” Death spread to all men when sin entered the world through Adam. The stated reason that “death spread to all men” was “because all sinned.” So all are guilty of sin and the spread of the punishment of death when Adam sinned. Simply put, all sinned when Adam sinned, which triggered death. We were not merely represented by Adam when he sinned but we were joined with him in his sin as the seed of all his posterity contained this guilt of sin and the ensuing punishment of death.

The birth of Christ through a virgin woman conceived by the Holy Spirit meant that Christ's physical body was not corrupted by sin. This allowed His sacrifice for sin to be the perfect sacrifice by the perfect person for the sin of mankind (Hebrews 10:1-18) to save his people from their sins (Matthew 1:21).

The Betrothal (1:18-19)

This passage begins with an introduction to the story of Jesus' birth. The point is not only that he was born according to the lineage of 1:2-16, but how the birth occurred. These events built upon the premise that Jesus' supernatural conception is a part of God's plan of salvation. The statement about Mary's being with a child from the Holy Spirit begins Matthew's development of who Jesus is.

It is necessary to understand the nature of betrothal among Jews in the first century in order to understand what faced Joseph when it was found that Mary was pregnant. Betrothal was a form of engagement that took place once the obligations set by the girl's father were fulfilled. This was considered a type of commitment to enter into formal marriage that was not easily abandoned.

The girl would be considered under the authority of the man even before the marriage would be completed. This can be seen in Matthew 1:18-25 where Joseph is taking responsibility in this situation. This also explains why the word for "divorce" is used in Matthew 1:19 even though they are not technically married yet, as seen in the phrase "before they came together" in Matthew 1:18.

The commitment during the betrothal period was much more than during engagement in our culture. The "divorce" that Joseph contemplated was because he was considered to be her "husband" (Matthew 1:19) even though they had not "come together" in marriage. In Jewish custom, the betrothed would be considered a widow if the man would pass away.

Girls entered into betrothal as young as twelve years old. This would mean that the families of the future bride and groom were the pivotal decision makers in this arrangement. The marriage would typically come after a year or so of betrothal, when the two would then share the same household. This would mean that Mary was almost certainly just a young teenager at this time of this event. Her age only adds to the drama of this story.

The response of Joseph was consistent with his character as a righteous and just man who sought to not harm her unnecessarily by exposing her to public disgrace. It was also consistent with his righteous character that he would seek to divorce her since he had only two options according to the Law:

- 1) He could publicly divorce her according to Deuteronomy 22:23-24. This would, according to the Law, involve a public stoning, though very rarely practiced in the time of Jesus.
- 2) He could privately divorce her by handing her a certificate of divorce in the presence of two or three witnesses (cf. Numbers 5:11-31).

The second option was Joseph's initial plan in order to not violate Leviticus 20:10 which calls for judgment upon those guilty of this type of sin. His decision to privately put her away was consistent with having compassion upon Mary. He was not yet informed as to how Mary became pregnant.

Joseph is a good example of a man with righteous character seeking to lessen the public disgrace of sin by showing mercy. We have no need to necessarily humiliate people by exposing their sinfulness in a public manner. Mercy triumphs over judgment (James 2:13).

The Revelation (1:20-21)

Joseph learned of the true nature of Mary's pregnancy from an angel. The "angel of the Lord" lacks a definite article in both 1:20 and 1:24 so we can conclude that this is a messenger of God, not God's very presence. The revelation informs Joseph of what the readers learned in 1:18, that the conception is from the Holy Spirit.

This is the only place in Matthew where the messianic term "son of David" does not refer to Jesus. Joseph is called "son of David" as it is consistent with the genealogy of Christ (1:1, 16) and would alert Joseph of the potential significance of this pregnancy. This would also support the encouragement to not fear.

The naming of the child was determined by God and Joseph simply carried out this command given by the angel (1:25). The name Jesus means God saves or God is salvation and was given because of Christ's mission on earth, to save His people from their sins (cf. Matthew 20:28). The statement that He will save His people from their sins is an allusion to Psalm 130:8, "And He will redeem Israel from all his iniquities."

That Matthew notes the angel's phrase "He will save His people" in place of the Psalmist's phrase "He will redeem Israel" is significant. Christ came to save His people and His people are not every person in the nation of Israel. There was always a remnant of true believers among the nation and the Jews of Jesus' day largely rejected Him (John 1:11). His salvation is also for His people that exist in other people groups (Matthew 28:19). This provides an early glimpse that the mission of Christ is beyond strictly the house of Israel.

The perspective of Israel was that the Messiah would deliver the nation from the oppression of foreigners. The concept of the Messiah saving people from sin was not not considered, but later we will see the difficulty His followers had in even considering the possibility (Matthew 16:21-23).

Some have seen a discrepancy in the Gospels as Luke records the birth announcement was made to Mary, not Joseph. But an announcement was made to both of them. Mary was the first to know since she was told she would conceive (Luke 1:31), while Joseph was told after Mary had become pregnant.

It makes sense that Mary would be told ahead of time, since she would be the first to know she was pregnant. Joseph would also need a message from God, since he would have known the baby was not his. Other examples of a pair of visions include Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10 and Saul and Ananias in Acts 9. Sometimes God reveals Himself to more than one person about the same event.

The Prophecy (1:22-23)

One purpose for the conception of Mary from the Holy Spirit was for the sake of the fulfillment of the Scripture. The phrasing of "what was spoken...fulfilled" is a prevalent theme in Matthew (2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 27:9; cf. 26:56). One of Matthew's main themes was to prove Jesus was the Messiah through His fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. There are some who view that 1:22 is a continuation of the words of the angel of the Lord from 1:21. While this is possible, verse 22 appears to be one of the noted comments by Matthew that he adds to emphasize the importance of prophetic fulfillment in proving Christ's messiahship.

The prophecy fulfilled is from Isaiah 7:14. This prophecy is described as by the Lord and through the prophet. The source of the revelation is the Lord and the prophet Isaiah was the instrumentality of the word from God. This expresses the high view of Scripture that we must embrace. The Scripture is the word of God. What the Scripture says, God says.

Regarding this prophecy, there are two major issues to be addressed:

First, the Greek text in Matthew 1:23 uses a word (*parthenos*) that means virgin for Mary while the Hebrew text of Isaiah 7:14 uses a word (*almah*) that does not necessarily mean this but refers to simply a young woman. Some suggest that Matthew took the Hebrew text out of its context to apply it to Mary's virginity. The Revised Standard Version (1952) and the New Revised Standard Version opted to translate Isaiah 7:14 as "young woman" rather than "virgin" as in other translations.

As is common in the New Testament, Matthew quotes from the Septuagint, the Greek Translation of the Old Testament. The Septuagint uses the same Greek word for virgin (*parthenos*) as Matthew's Gospel. This translation choice by the Septuagint is reasonable since the Hebrew word *almah* is always used in its seven Old Testament occurrences in the singular to mean a maiden who is unmarried and chaste. For example, Genesis 24:43 uses *almah* as referring to the virgin Rebekah. Therefore, while Isaiah 7:14 uses a less precise word for virgin, it still is the equivalent meaning.

In fact, this less precise Hebrew word for virgin is an ideal word because it is able to refer to both the bride of Isaiah who was a virgin until her wedding and to Mary who was a virgin until after the birth of Christ. That the Septuagint would translate the word in Greek as virgin supports Matthew's use of the same word.

The second issue involves how this prophecy in Isaiah 7:14 is fulfilled by Mary.

The prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 was fulfilled in the short-term by the birth of Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz as a sign that God was with His people for their physical deliverance. The prophecy was given in 735 B.C. and before the child was old enough to know good from evil (7:16). Assyria defeated Judah's enemies, Damascus and Samaria, in 732 B.C. and thus Israel was delivered.

There is much theological debate surrounding how to view this prophecy with three primary points of view:

- 1) One view is the multiple fulfillment perspective where Isaiah intended the prophecy for the short-term fulfillment but God intended a second fulfillment in the birth of Jesus. This leads to two different purposes, one by Isaiah as a sign to Ahaz and one for Matthew in the birth of Christ.
- 2) Another view sees the prophecy of Isaiah as specifically fulfilled in this sign of deliverance to Ahaz and the fulfillment in the birth of Christ was as a type, or a picture of God's deliverance through the Son. This emphasizes the fulfillment in Isaiah's day.

3) The third view is that Isaiah's prophecy was foreseeing the birth of Christ. Isaiah intended the prophecy to be fulfilled in Christ.

It should be clear from Matthew's text that the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 is fulfilled in the long-term by the birth of Jesus Christ as a sign that God would deliver His people from their spiritual bondage to sin at the crucifixion. But how to view Isaiah 7:14?

One problem with the first two views is that this would lead to two virgin births, one of Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz and one of Jesus Christ. If Isaiah 7:14 means what Matthew wrote, then any fulfillment in Isaiah's day would require a virgin birth.

Secondly, in what sense would a normal birth be a sign in Isaiah 7:14? This verse requires a virgin birth which occurred uniquely with the birth of Christ.

A third problem with any fulfillment in Isaiah's day regards the name Immanuel. In what sense would Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz be "God with us?" Certainly, not in the sense of Christ dwelling among us as the Son of God. This name could only be fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

It seems best to take Matthew's words literally, that the birth of Christ to a virgin was the fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14. The rest of the account in Isaiah refers to the deliverance of Israel in the timeframe before Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz would be able to discern between good and evil.

Some question why Jesus was not called Immanuel in the New Testament. It was not given as a proper name but as a title, God with us (cf. John 1:14, 18). This was seen also with Solomon who was named Jedidiah by God in 2 Samuel 12:24-25.

The Birth (1:24-25)

The conclusion to this story centers around Joseph's obedience. He changed his plans immediately. His marriage to Mary both demonstrated his righteousness in submission to the Lord and brought Jesus into the line of David through Joseph via adoption as his father. Joseph is the one who names the infant as his father. This affirms the legal status of Jesus Christ in the lineage.

The text clearly states that Mary remained a virgin not only until her marriage to Joseph but also up through the birth of Jesus. He kept her a virgin ("knew her not" ESV) *until* she gave birth to a son. This informs the issue of Mary's perpetual virginity, as taught by the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church also.

The word “until” strongly implies Joseph kept her a virgin only until the birth of Christ. The fact of the existence of Jesus’ brothers (James, Joseph, Simon and Judas) and sisters (Matthew 13:55-56, cf. Matthew 12:46, Mark 3:31-35, 6:3; Luke 8:19-20; John 2:12, 7:3-10; Acts 1:14) speaks to the virginity of Mary ending with the birth of Jesus.

The idea that Mary remained a virgin dates back to the earlier centuries of church history. The doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary lacks any biblical support and is arrived at through a desire to venerate her beyond what the Scripture teaches. The doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary is why she holds the Catholic title of “Virgin Mary.”

The desire to glorify Mary has led to various other miraculous doctrines related to Mary, including her immaculate conception (that she too was born of a virgin, officially approved as doctrine in 1477) and her bodily assumption (that she did not die but ascended into heaven, officially approved as doctrine in 1950). These false doctrines have unfortunately served to exalt her to a place of honor and veneration that competes with the worship of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

The first chapter of Matthew concludes with the miraculous birth of Christ to a virgin girl. This testifies strongly to the uniqueness of Christ. His birth was supernatural and He would embody the meaning of the name Jesus, “God (Yahweh) saves.

The prophetic fulfillment with the birth of Christ proves His legitimacy as the Messiah of Israel. The angelic announcement of His birth shows the divine role of Jesus as the Savior (“He will save His people from their sins”) and the fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14 shows His divine Person in that He is indeed “God with us.”

In addition, His genealogy proves He held a rightful claim as the Son of David to be the Messiah. He was legitimately the King of the Jews. He could rightfully claim to be the Messiah in order to bring salvation to the world as the Son of God sent to dwell among us.

Beyond the theological proof of Christ as the Messiah, there is the human element of Mary’s role. A young teenage girl became pregnant from the Holy Spirit. Her dilemma was paralleled by the difficulty that Joseph faced in marrying her. Their faithfulness in the midst of this blessed trial should not be overlooked.