

Waiting for a Savior

King of Heaven: The (Un)expected King

Matthew 1:18-25

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A Surprise Savior

Our passage this morning is Matthew 1:18-25. Each week in Advent, we're focusing on something God's people were waiting for at Jesus' first coming. This week we see they were waiting for a Savior. But as we said last week, although they were expecting a Savior, Jesus was not quite the Savior they were expecting. They were expecting a Messiah who would save them from Rome. But as we learn today in verse 21, Jesus came to save his people from their sins. Who would the Messiah need to be if he was going to save them from their sins? Our passage highlights two things.

This is a very familiar passage. It tells the story of the birth of Christ. But although it's familiar, it's full of surprises. The more I study the Bible, the more I come to expect to see things I've never seen before, and that's exactly what I experienced this week as well. I see two surprises in this passage. I think the first one would've been plain for the original readers, but it's a surprise for many of us today. The second surprise is something we're very familiar with as Christians, but would've been astounding to the original readers.

Our passage follows a basic story outline.¹ There's a crisis at the beginning. A scandalous situation. A crisis pregnancy. Then a climax, or a turning point, in the middle with the angelic intervention. And a resolution at the end with Joseph's courageous submission. Let's read it together.

Matthew 1:18-25²

¹⁸Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. ²⁰But 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. ²¹She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²²All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

*²³"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call his name Immanuel"*

(which means, God with us). ²⁴When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, ²⁵but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

This is the Word of the Lord.

I want to highlight the first surprise of the passage by walking through the whole story in the steps of Joseph. Then we'll zoom into the angel's words in the middle of the passage to see the second surprise. These two surprises will teach us two things about who Jesus is. Two things in him that are necessary to save us from our sins.

¹ Adapted from David Camera, "[A Divine Savior](#)."

² Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

A DESPERATE SITUATION

Let's begin with Joseph's story. Luke tells the Christmas story through Mary's eyes. Matthew tells it through Joseph's eyes. And as the story begins, we find Joseph in a desperate situation. A scandalous situation really. He's faced with a crisis pregnancy.

We live in a day when pregnancy outside of marriage is common, but in first century Palestine, this was almost unheard of. Marriage in that culture happened differently than today. There were three stages.³ First, marriages were arranged by fathers when their children were very young. That arrangement was called the engagement period. But when a girl became a teenager, they would move into a betrothal period. This formalized the engagement and made it legal. The betrothal lasted a year. During that time, they would be considered husband and wife. But they would not live together and wouldn't sleep together. The woman would live with her father until the year was up. Then they would have the public marriage ceremony. And only at that time would the couple consummate their marriage.

So, when we read verse 18, we can see how Joseph and Mary are in the middle of a scandalous situation. Mary had been betrothed to Joseph but before they came together, before they consummated their marriage, she was found to be with child.

We don't know how she was found out. Maybe she had morning sickness. Maybe she's showing. But she's found out. Probably by her parents at first. Can you imagine the questions her father would've asked her? "How could you? Who's the father? Is it Joseph? Or another man? How could you sin against God and dishonor our family?"⁴

Luke tells us that an angel had appeared to Mary and told her what was going to happen beforehand. So, can you imagine her trying to explain that to her parents or to Joseph? As a friend of mine has said, she's doing something worse than saying the devil made her do it; she's saying God is behind this! Who would believe that? The only option conceivable is she committed adultery. And maybe blasphemy!

So, Joseph is in a desperate situation (v. 19). What is he to do? Well as a righteous man, he was obligated to follow God's law. And God's law called him to divorce Mary for committing adultery during their betrothal period. He could divorce her publicly which would vindicate him but shame Mary. Or he could divorce her privately. This would not bring shame on Mary. This is what he chose to do. Unwilling to put her to shame, he resolved to divorce her quietly.⁵

But then an angel intervenes (vv. 20-21). He appears to Joseph in a dream and validates Mary. The baby in her womb *was* conceived by the Holy Spirit.

But here's where I ran into a surprise in the story. The angel not only deals with the problem of a perceived scandal. The angel also deals with a problem I didn't catch until I studied this passage in depth. The angel says to Joseph, "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" (vv. 20-21). Why does the angel begin by

³ Douglas Sean O'Donnell, *Matthew: All Authority in Heaven and on Earth*

⁴ Cf. Camera

⁵ Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary

calling Joseph the son of David? Why does he encourage him to marry Mary? And why does he tell him to name the child Jesus?

Well, remember what the genealogy taught us? Jesus is the promised Messiah. And the Messiah is the son of David. So, the genealogy traces the legal line of David's descendants all the way to Joseph. But then in verse 16 there's a change in the pattern. Instead of saying, "Jacob the father of Joseph, the father of Jesus," it says, "Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ" (1:16).

Joseph was not actually Jesus' father biologically. So, how could Jesus be the Messiah, if he's not a legal heir to the throne of David? Only if Joseph married Mary and then adopted Jesus could Jesus be the legal son of David. And in that culture, if Joseph named Jesus, he was in effect adopting Jesus.⁶

So, what does Joseph do after he's confronted by the angel? We're told that when he woke from sleep, he did as the angel commanded him; he took Mary as his wife. And after she gave birth to a son, he called his name Jesus.

In the face of a scandal, in a situation that put his reputation on the line, he showed courageous submission to God. He heard the word of God and believed. And that belief led to obedience. He married Mary and adopted Jesus.

This first surprise in the text teaches us our first truth about our Savior: Jesus is the son of David through adoption by Joseph.

Like I said earlier, this first surprise is really more of a surprise for us as modern readers than the original readers. I've not heard much about Jesus' adoption by Joseph. But it was critical to establish that Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior. The second surprise isn't a surprise to us, but it was for the original readers. And it has to do with the angel's words to Joseph. We've already looked at some of those words, but now I want to look closer.

A PROPHETIC EXPLANATION

As the narrator, Matthew is clear that Jesus' conception was not an act of adultery; Jesus was conceived of the Holy Spirit (v. 18). Then the angel speaks clearly on this too. He tells Joseph that the baby in her womb was conceived from the Holy Spirit (v. 20). So, it was a virgin conception.

But then we see this again, when either Matthew or the angel tells us that all of this took place to fulfill what the Lord had already spoken by the prophet Isaiah (v. 22): "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel, which means God with us" (v. 23).

So, not only is Jesus' birth miraculous; it was also predicted in Isaiah. It is the fulfillment of Scripture like everything else we read about Jesus' early years in Matthew 1-2. The text in Isaiah 7 is very difficult and it's not entirely clear that everyone would've seen it as a prophecy of the Messiah in the eighth century BC. And so, it would've probably been a surprise to Matthew's first readers as well. But Matthew makes it clear that Isaiah's words pointed beyond his day to the coming of Jesus.

⁶ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary
R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament

For our purposes, I simply want to highlight why it matters that Jesus was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. And why it matters that, in the incarnation, God is with us.

The virgin conception by the Holy Spirit establishes how it's possible for Jesus to be fully God and fully man. He was born of Mary (v. 16). The child was conceived in her (v. 20). Mary bears him as her son (v. 21). So, he's clearly a human. But his conception was also by the Holy Spirit. This is repeated twice in the passage (vv. 18, 21). And we're told that this virgin conception will lead people to call Jesus Immanuel, which means God with us. So, Jesus is not only a man, he's also God.

He's not only the Son of David through adoption by Joseph. He's also the Son of God through the virgin conception by the Holy Spirit.

Why is this important? If Jesus is going to save his people from their sins, he needs to be both fully man and fully God. Only as man is he qualified to pay the penalty that humanity owes for our sin. But only God is able to pay for our sins. No mere man could pay the debt we all owe to an eternal God. So, if Jesus is going to save his people from their sins, he must be God and man. And the virgin conception by the Holy Spirit makes this possible.⁷

But the passage doesn't simply tell us that Jesus is fully God and fully man, in doctrinaire terms, like I've just described. No, instead Matthew tells us that Jesus is God with us. That's not simply theological language. That's relational language.

In the old covenant, God was with his covenant people as they wandered in the wilderness. He led them in the fire and the cloud. He resided with them in the tabernacle and later the temple. God redeemed his people to reside with them!

But then they broke his covenant. And Ezekiel describes the process where God's presence left the temple, when the Jews were in exile. God was no longer present with his people as he was before. His relationship with them was severely broken.

But then Jesus is born of Mary. And we're told that he's the Son of David, the Messianic king. But he's also God with us. God's presence has come back to his people in the person of Jesus. Then Jesus goes on to talk about establishing the new covenant Ezekiel and Jeremiah spoke of. Where God would forgive his people's sins, and again be their God and they his people.

Who is this baby in the manger? So often when children think of baby Jesus, they think, oh how adorable! And that's a start. He should be adored, as we'll learn next week. But we adore him not simply because he's a baby. We adore him because he is the majestic king, the son of David, whose kingdom will know no end. We adore him because he is the Son of God. He is very God of very God, who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man.

God with us! He is the one who came to save us from our sins. O come let us adore him.

THE LORD'S SUPPER

But how does he save us from our sins? To answer that, we need to turn to Matthew 26:26-29.⁸ As Jesus observed the Last Supper with his disciples, right before he went to the cross, this is what he

⁷ Cf. Blomberg

⁸ Camera

said. “Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body.’ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.’”

How does the son of David and the Son of God save his people from their sins? He offers his life as a sacrifice for our sins. His body was broken and his blood shed on the cross. His blood is the blood of the new covenant. His blood is how we’re forgiven our sins.

We’ve sinned against God and deserve his judgment and wrath. Death. Eternal death and separation from God’s presence. In our sin, we find ourselves in a very desperate situation. But in Christ, he has given his life as a substitute for our life. Christ is God with us. He has come near to us. So, we can now draw near to God. He has restored our broken relationship with God.

At the end of the Last Supper, Jesus says, “I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.” I’m pretty sure that this is speaking of the great feast on the last day, the wedding supper of the Lamb which will happen after Christ returns (Rev. 19:6-10).

Paul says something similar in 1 Corinthians 11. He says, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (v. 26). Why do I point this out? Well at the end of Matthew Jesus gives an amazing promise. Christ was not only with us when he came to earth and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary. Right before he leaves the earth and returns to the Father he says, “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt. 28:20). Until that day when he returns.

He was incarnate by the Holy Spirit. And now through the Holy Spirit, he is still with us until the end. As we wait for his second advent, he is still Immanuel. As we take the good news of his salvation for sins to the ends of the earth, he is with us!