

Immanuel, God With Us

Matthew 1:18-25 on December 19, 2021

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Matthew 1:18-25 tells us, “This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.’ All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’ (which means ‘God with us’). When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.”

Matthew 1:18 begins, “This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.” Among the 1st century Jews, being “pledged to be married” “was a much more binding relationship than a modern engagement, and could be broken only by divorce.”¹ In other words, Joseph couldn’t simply break off the engagement when he found out that Mary was pregnant. Now Joseph, was fully devoted to God, and he honored God by obeying Him. So he had no concerns that this baby was his. You see, “there were no sexual relations during a Jewish betrothal period.”² “Sexual relations and living together under one roof were not permitted until AFTER the marriage ceremony.”^{3 4 5} So Joseph honored God by obeying His design for marriage. This has been God’s design for humankind all along. God’s beautiful design for sex within marriage is clear all throughout Scripture, and that design, remains in place, even up to our present day. God designed sex to be a physical union between one man and one woman, within a committed marriage covenant. Hebrews 13:4 warns us, “Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.”⁶

¹ *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1590 footnote on Matthew 1:18.

² *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1590 footnote on Matthew 1:18.

³ (Blomberg, C. (1992). Matthew (Vol. 22, p. 57). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.)

⁴ “They were legally bound to each other but not yet living together as husband and wife.” *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1590 footnote on Matthew 1:20.

⁵ “Jewish couples often wed when the young man was about 18 and the young woman was in her very early teens. Prior to marriage they would not live together and were expected to refrain from sexual relations until after their wedding ceremony.” *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1927 footnote on Matthew 1:18.

⁶ See also Genesis 1:27, 2:24; Exodus 20:14; Matthew 19:4-6; and 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, 7:1-9.

⁷ For anyone who considers themselves a fully devoted follower of Jesus, this same beautiful design of committed marital love, continues into our modern day.

Joseph knew that his personal choice had been to wait to have sex until marriage. Therefore, he came to the obvious conclusion: Mary must not have waited; she must have slept with another man. What other possible explanation could there be? So, at least initially, he doesn't even begin to buy her explanation, about supposedly being "pregnant through the Holy Spirit." What does that even mean, "pregnant through the Holy Spirit"? Well, this isn't some kind of a bizarre story where one of the Greek gods came down and fell in love with a mortal, and then they had a baby together. No! Not at all! What Matthew 1 is telling us is that Jesus' conception was a miracle of God. This pregnancy was supernatural. This is something well beyond our common scientific understandings of human conception, which everyone would agree usually requires both a male and female biological connection. One author notes: "When it comes to the virgin birth, there is no shortage of modern objections. It reeks of premodern ignorance and superstition. It is scientifically impossible..."⁸ "[However,] the Bible is a thoroughly supernatural book. It asserts the freedom of God, not only to act through the systems of nature...but also to act outside [of, or even] against, those systems. The virgin birth is a supremely supernatural event...."^{9 10}

This particular supernatural event helped establish that Jesus was born sinless. Luke 1:35 explains it this way, "The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the HOLY one to be born will be called the Son of God."¹¹ "The holy one to be born" is referring to Jesus; He was born holy. "Mysteriously, the Holy Spirit ensures that although...biologically-Jesus is truly descended from Mary, He inherited none of her [sin nature]."¹² Jesus was born sinless, and then He then went on to live a sinless life, every single day that He spent on planet earth. And aren't you glad that He did!? Thanks to Jesus' perfectly righteous life, He was then able to offer Himself as a perfect sacrifice for our sins. Jesus' sacrifice was sufficient to pay the price, that God's holy justice demanded. 1 Peter 3:18 explains it this way, "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God...." 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us...."¹³ Most of us cherish the classic Christmas Carol, "Silent Night;" it's one of our favorites! Silent Night also talks about a "Holy Night," which is actually a far more accurate description of the night when Jesus was born. (After all, anyone who's had a

⁷ 1 Thessalonians 4:3-4 teaches us, "It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable."

⁸ "...And [some would even say] it's unnecessary, for Jesus can be a powerful example for us even if He is merely human." Kevin D. Gardener, *The Virgin Mother Kind*, December 2021 article in *Tabletalk*, Sanford, FL, p. 8.

⁹ Kevin D. Gardener, *The Virgin Mother Kind*, December 2021 article in *Tabletalk*, Sanford, FL, p. 9.

¹⁰ Kevin D. Gardener points out that "When the virgin birth is denied, denial of Jesus' divinity is often not far behind, and denial of our need for Christ's salvific work not far behind that." (*The Virgin Mother Kind*, December 2021 article in *Tabletalk*, Sanford, FL, p. 10.)

¹¹ See 2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 2:17, 4:15, 7:26; 1 Peter 2:22; and 1 John 3:5. Fully human in every way, and without sin.

¹² Jonty Rhodes, *Thy Holy Face*, December 2021 article in *Tabletalk*, Sanford, FL, p. 15.

¹³ See Isaiah 53:4-6.

newborn baby, will tell you that there aren't too many "silent" nights!) But the night Jesus was born was most certainly a HOLY night! And as the carol proclaims in its final stanza, that Holy Night was "the dawn of redeeming grace, Jesus, [was] Lord, at [His] birth."¹⁴ Jesus supernatural conception and virgin birth was a key step forward in God's salvation plan. That night in Bethlehem, God's redeeming grace was dawning through the birth of the sinless Savior of the world.^{15 16}

Despite Joseph's obvious disappointment that Mary cheated on him, Matthew 1:19 says that "Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly." In Jewish culture, the maximum penalty for this kind of sexual infidelity, could go even so far, as someone being put to death. So Joseph's decision to divorce her quietly meant that "He would sign the necessary legal papers but not have her judged publicly and stoned."^{17 18} In other words, in this extremely challenging situation, Joseph had chosen a genuinely merciful route. Even though it was initially impossible for him, to believe her story about being pregnant through the Holy Spirit, He still choose the path of gentle mercy in dealing with her apparent sin.

Matthew 1:20 goes on to tell us, "But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.'" Once again, we see God supernaturally at work.¹⁹ Joseph now understands that Mary had NOT been unfaithful to him after all, and they can now proceed with their wedding plans. (albeit with some rather unique alterations).^{20 21} In essence, the angel gives Joseph a much-needed pep talk: "Look Joseph, here's what you're going to do: Take Mary home as your wife, she's going to have a baby boy, and YOU are going to name him Jesus." (And that's exactly what Joseph does, in obedience to God.)²²

¹⁴ "Silent Night, Holy Night" carol by Joseph Mohr, 1818, verse 3.

¹⁵ Jonty Rhodes, *Thy Holy Face*, December 2021 article in *Tabletalk*, Sanford, FL, p. 16.

¹⁶ To be clear, the virgin conception of Jesus is what matters. "Christians have traditionally labeled this account as 'the virgin birth,' but the important point, theologically, is not that Mary was a virgin at the time Jesus was born but that she was a virgin at the time Jesus was conceived." *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1927 footnote on Matthew 1:18-25.

¹⁷ *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1590 footnote on Matthew 1:19.

¹⁸ The Old Testament Jewish Law was extremely strict on this issue. See Deuteronomy 22:23-24.

¹⁹ "The virgin birth points to Jesus' *origin* as one who comes from God...[the emphasis is] on the divine initiative." *Evangelical Convictions*, Free Church Publications, Minneapolis, MN, 2011, bottom of p. 100.

²⁰ See *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1928 footnote on Matthew 1:20-21.

²¹ We're never told when Joseph and Mary had their actual wedding ceremony, but verse 25 makes it clear that they remained sexually abstinent until Jesus was born. (*The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1928 footnote on Matthew 1:24-25.) Even though most people likely had a tough time believing Joseph and Mary's story about a virgin conception, this godly couple was indeed making righteous choices to live God's way.

²² And even though Jesus is most certainly NOT Joseph's biological son, He does officially become Joseph's legal son, "and thus legally [a] son of David." Blomberg, C. (1992). *Matthew* (Vol. 22, p. 59). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers. Matthew 1:1-17 is the immediately preceding context. Verses 1-15 record Jesus' genealogy all the way back to Abraham, through King David. Then verse 16 brings us up to Joseph, who was Mary's husband, who was Jesus' mother. Verse 17 summarizes Jesus' family tree: Abraham to David, David to the exile in Babylon, the exile to the Messiah.

The events we're reading about here, fulfilled an Old Testament prophecy from Isaiah 7:14.²³ ²⁴ Matthew 1:23 records it for us, "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (which means 'God with us')." ²⁵ Baby Jesus was fully human, but He was most certainly not an ordinary child. This miraculous conception would lead to the birth of a miraculous person. That's why Jesus is called by this fascinating name: Immanuel. This points to Him having an incredibly unique makeup: Jesus was BOTH God and man. In fact He was fully God, while at the very same time being fully human. Let's take a look at these 2 aspects of Jesus' nature, 1 at a time... First of all,

1) Jesus is fully God. He was not partly god. He was not semi-divine. He was not some kind of a demigod. Jesus is FULLY God. In fact, He's always been fully God, throughout all eternity. We sing about this in the Christmas Carol, "O Come All Ye Faithful": "True God of true God, Light from light eternal, Lo, he shuns not the virgin's womb; Son of the Father, begotten, not created; O come, let us adore him..." ²⁶ The fact that Jesus is fully God means that He, along with the Holy Spirit, has all of the exact same attributes as God the Father. Followers of Jesus have believed this for 2,000 years; they believe it because that's what the Bible teaches. Colossians 2:9 tells us, "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form." In John 14:9, Jesus says about Himself: "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." Philippians 2:6 says that Jesus is "in very nature God." One author rightly points out that, "the early Christians were not content with describing Jesus simply as a great moral teacher or even as a prophet of God. His words and actions compelled them to turn to the category of divinity, in order to explain him. Nothing less would do. Jesus was God incarnate." ²⁷

This belief in Jesus' divine nature has been clarified and summarized by Christ-followers in documents like the Nicene ²⁸ Creed. Back in the 4th century, a group of believers prayerfully put together this statement of beliefs. (It's listed in our hymnal, #15.) Here's how it summarizes Jesus: "We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only

²³ The original historical setting in Isaiah 7:14, for this name "Immanuel," was meant to convince King Ahaz "that God could rescue him from his enemies." (See *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, pp. 1125-1126 footnotes on Isaiah 7:1, 14.)

In other words, "God with us" meant God was with him. He didn't need to align himself with any other nation's armies. "God with us" is all the assurance any human being should ever need to trust that God will provide. So this prophecy was actually partially fulfilled back in the days of King Ahaz. However, it's more important fulfillment happened through Jesus. Jesus was the ultimate fulfillment of this prophecy for all mankind, because Jesus is 'God with us' in the fullest sense of its meaning. (*The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1126 footnote on Isaiah 7:14.)

²⁴ "Matthew is operating typologically. Old Testament events, viewed as of crucial significance in the history of salvation, are seen to display patterns of God's activity, which are being repeated in the events surrounding Jesus' birth. Such parallels can be attributed only to God. A text that may well have had a previous historical referent is seen as being completed or filled full, a common meaning of the verb plēroō ("fulfill")." (Blomberg, C. (1992). *Matthew* (Vol. 22, p. 57). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.)

²⁵ "Immanuel" is translated for the benefit of those in Matthew's audience who could not understand the Hebrew." Blomberg, C. (1992). *Matthew* (Vol. 22, p. 59). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

²⁶ This is stanza 2.

²⁷ *Evangelical Convictions*, Free Church Publications, Minneapolis, MN, 2011, p. 92.

²⁸ "KNI zeen"

Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary and became truly human....” Now, because there is so much evidence to support that Jesus is fully God, it may cause us to wonder, how he could be, truly human. The Bible teaches that...

2) Jesus became fully human. He hasn't always been human, throughout all eternity; He only recently became human, about 2,000 years ago. We refer to this as His incarnation. This is when Jesus took on flesh for the very first time. Jesus was conceived in Mary's womb, and He went through all the normal stages of human development in her womb, just like any other child. "Jesus was a human being in a real and complete sense, with all the qualities that constitute true humanity."²⁹ Now, earlier we learned that Jesus was completely holy, and without sin. If Jesus became fully human, then how could He be without sin? After all, everyone knows that humans are sinners: "to err is human," right? So how could Jesus, who is fully God, possibly become FULLY human?

The answer to this question requires us to rethink what it means to be human. You see, it's actually possible to be a human and not be a sinner. Now, those of us listening to this message, we were born with a sin nature. So "sinners are gonna sin." But way back in the garden of Eden, at least for a little while there, Adam and Eve were not sinners. Eventually, they chose to sin, and we inherited their sin nature. But this reminds us that one can indeed be fully human, AND be without sin. Jesus did indeed become fully human, yet HE was without sin. The New Testament actually makes an interesting comparison between Jesus and Adam. Adam is the one who brought sin into our human experience, and Jesus came to take it out. Romans 5:19 says it this way, "For just as through the disobedience of the one man (*this is referring to Adam*) the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man (*that is, Jesus*) the many will be made righteous." 1 Corinthians 15:21 agrees, "For since death came through a man (*Adam*), the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man (*Jesus*)."

You see, because Jesus became fully human, and then lived a life completely without sin, He's the perfect One to represent mankind before God. He came and cleaned up Adam's mess. He proved that being human does not mean we are forever trapped in sin. He provided a way for us to be made righteous, so that we could be in relationship with God.³⁰ Being fully human is what makes Jesus the perfect representative for humankind. On the one hand, He completely identifies with our humanity. On the other

²⁹ *Evangelical Convictions*, Free Church Publications, Minneapolis, MN, 2011, bottom of p. 97.

³⁰ In other words, Jesus was fully human, but born perfectly holy and without sin, which is why he could offer the perfect sacrifice that God's justice demanded. Logically then, we must understand that being sinful is NOT a prerequisite for being human. Thus, Alexander Pope's saying, "to err is human," is untrue for Christ. "to be truly human, thank God, does NOT entail sin. Adam was made without sin. One day in the new heavens and earth, we will be truly human yet entirely without sin." Jonty Rhodes, *Thy Holy Face*, December 2021 article in *Tabletalk*, Sanford, FL, p. 16.

hand, He is powerful enough to overcome sin.³¹ ³² In other words, the details around Jesus' manger scene inform our understanding of Jesus' perfect sacrifice on the cross.³³ In order for Jesus to die the required physical death, He had to first be born to physical life. One author explains it this way: "Jesus Christ is truly God and truly man. He is fully and completely both at the same time, showing us the true nature of each. He is not some mixture of humanity and divinity, creating a third kind of being, like a horse and donkey becoming a mule. The Son of God remained God-he never gave up being God...and since the incarnation, the Son of God will forever be human."³⁴ Another author says this: "He who was face-to-face with God became flesh to be face-to-face with us. Only One who is truly God can reconcile us to God. Yet only One who becomes flesh can substitute for us. Wonder of wonders, One who was face-to-face with God and man, truly God and truly man, has come to save us."³⁵ You see, God became flesh so that His flesh could be crucified on the cross. As one Christmas Carol puts it: "Nails, spear shall pierce him through, the cross be borne for me, for you; hail, hail the word made flesh, the babe, the son of Mary."³⁶

Theologians have a really cool word for all this: The "HYPOSTATIC UNION" This hypostatic union is "a crucial component of orthodox Christology...Christ has two natures, human and divine, united in one person... 'true man, yet very God.'"³⁷ ³⁸ Jesus' unique nature, graciously presents us with an opportunity to be in a relationship with God. To put it another way, "God with us," is an invitation to "Us With God." Christmas is not only a wonderful *demonstration* of Jesus' true and awesome identity, it is also a wonderful *invitation* for each of us to enjoy a relationship WITH God. Jesus came to earth as Immanuel, as God with us, because of God's own choosing. His plan, from the beginning to the end of creation, was to dwell among those who would put their trust in Him. This is by His open invitation, and now the ball is in our court, we must decide of our own choosing, to embrace this opportunity to draw near to God, who has deliberately drawn near to us through Jesus.

³¹ "Only as God did Christ have the power to bear our sins and conquer them...." *Evangelical Convictions*, Free Church Publications, Minneapolis, MN, 2011, bottom of p. 99.

³² We might also note that Jesus had all of the credentials needed to be God's promised Messiah; He was fully qualified and met every prophetic requirement. See *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1926 footnote on Matthew 1:1-2:23.

³³ "the manger makes sense only at the cross." Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Word Made Flesh*, December 2021 article in *Tabletalk*, Sanford, FL, p. 11.

³⁴ *Evangelical Convictions*, Free Church Publications, Minneapolis, MN, 2011, pp. 98-99.

³⁵ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Word Made Flesh*, December 2021 article in *Tabletalk*, Sanford, FL, p. 11.

³⁶ *What Child is This?* by William C. Dix, verse 2.

³⁷ Kevin D. Gardener, *The Virgin Mother Kind*, December 2021 article in *Tabletalk*, Sanford, FL, p. 9.

³⁸ You see, "Jesus was NOT the ideal man who reached up to God. He was God incarnate; God reaching down to man. God graciously entered into human affairs to accomplish his good purposes." *Evangelical Convictions*, Free Church Publications, Minneapolis, MN, 2011, pp. 100-101.