

# Mary: From Bitterness to Blessing

## Mary's Account of Christ's Birth

### Matthew 1:18-23; Luke 2:1-7; Luke 1:46-55

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*From Brokenness to Blessing Christmas Series*


Prepared by: Matthew S. Black

Sunday, December 22, 2013, 10:30am at Living Hope Church of Roselle, Illinois

“Grace is the good pleasure of God that inclines Him to bestow benefits upon the undeserving...to pity the wretched, spare the guilty, welcome the outcast, and bring into favor those who were before under just condemnation. Its use to us sinful people is to save us and make us sit together in heavenly places to demonstrate to the ages the exceeding riches of God’s kindness to us in Christ Jesus.” – A. W. TOZER

#### ANNOUNCEMENTS

- TONIGHT: CANDLELIGHT SERVICE, 5PM
- TOMORROW: SHERYL HALAS MEMORIAL, 7PM
- MARKLUND HOME, CHRISTMAS DAY, 1PM – SIGNUP AT WELCOME CENTER
- BABY DEDICATIONS: JAN 5 AM SERVICE
- SPECIAL SPEAKERS: MIKE TIBERI JAN 5 AM, JOAQUIM FRAGOSO JAN 5PM
- **TIMOTHY JAMES POLDERMAN BORN TODAY DEC. 22 AT 12:01 AM, 20 INCHES LONG**

 Open your Bible to **Matthew 1:18**. We are going to begin in Matthew and move to Luke later this morning. We are considering how God brings us from bitterness to blessing. This week we are looking at Mary.

Next week we will have Bro. Matthew Seufert, one of our professors at Chicago Reformed Seminary. He preached for us during the summer. We are looking at several men in the days to come as possible candidates for Associate Pastor, and Matthew is one we want to get to know. This morning we are looking at a message I’ve entitled: “From Bitterness to Blessing: Mary’s Account of Christ’s Birth.”<sup>1</sup>

#### No Effulgent Glory

In the Old Testament, the Second Person of the Trinity would often reveal and manifest Himself, sometimes as a Theophany (an appearance as God) such as appearing as the Angel of YHWH. And at times there would be an effulgence, a glory. But as we celebrate God’s coming into the world today, we must realize as Paul’s canonical hymn of Philippians 2 states, this time

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the material is gained from Dr. Doug Bookman, “The Life of Christ” from All Grace Outreach and can be obtained at [life-leadership-home.com](http://life-leadership-home.com). Dr. Bookman is a professor at Shepherd’s Seminary in Cary, North Carolina.

in the incarnation, there was no effulgent glory. There was no effusive magnificence that sets him apart. He comes undercover, veiled in humble human flesh, as an infant. He made himself “of no reputation.” He set aside the active use of His non-communicable attributes.

*Mild, He lays His glory by,  
Born that man no more may die,  
Born to raise the sons of earth,  
Born to give them second birth.*

## Outline

We three signposts on our journey today

- Mary’s bitterness (Matthew 1:18-25)
- Joseph’s burden (Luke 2:1-7)
- God’s blessing (Luke 1:46-55)

## I. Mary’s **Bitterness** (Matt. 1:18-25).

### The Bitterness of Misunderstanding

The joy and glory of Christ’s birth would not be understood by humanity when He came. Never before and never since had a virgin birth taken place. When a woman is pregnant, in every case except Mary, it means there were sexual relations.

Mary is the only woman in the history of the world that was supernaturally impregnated. This is glorious to us now. It soars with the grace and glory of God in our eyes. But in the eyes of Mary’s family, friends, and peers, it meant scandal.

## Biblical Betrothal

**Matthew 1:18-19**, “Now 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. <sup>19</sup> And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.” Divorce. Scandal. But wait, this doesn’t make sense to Western minds because we don’t understand *ancient Jewish betrothal*.

To be betrothed in ancient Jewish culture is to be married. Betrothal is not engagement. The marriages were arranged. In ancient Jewish culture marriage would occur at a young age. Probably Mary was likely around 14 or 15 when she bore the Christ-child. The young man was not much older, maybe 16 or 17. The idea that Joseph was much older, has no basis in reality – it is purely speculative. Actually the idea that Joseph was an older man when he took Mary as his wife is from six very questionable and heretical documents which were Gnostic in origin.<sup>2</sup> All that to say, Joseph was likely **not** much older than Mary.

### Pater Archos

The families would arrange the marriages. There was not a lot of individualism in the ancient world, especially in Israel. It was all about your family, your clan. The clans were headed,

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<sup>2</sup> Protoevangelium of James (130AD), The Gospel of Thomas (130AD), the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew (fifth century), Gospel of the Nativity of Mary (fifth century), Arabic Gospel of the Infancy of the Savior (date unknown), Coptic History of Joseph the Carpenter (sixth century).

usually by the oldest living male called the Pater Archos, the patriarch or the ruling father. The clan of the young man would approach the clan of the young woman. Someone in the prospective groom's family who knew the groom well would approach the prospective Bride's family. This person was called the "Friend of the Bridegroom." He would approach the prospective Bride's family and offer the family a contract by which the young people would be married.

If the contract was agreed to, there would be a betrothal. They would come before a judge in Israel and sign the contract. The contract would define the period of the betrothal. There would be several months when the Groom would prepare a home for his bride. Betrothal was legal marriage, without the consummation. The Bride during this time would "make herself ready." After those months of preparation there would be a wedding.

### **Invitations for the Wedding**

So Joseph's family sent a contract to Mary's family, and they agreed, went before a judge in Israel, and were legally betrothed. Invitations and word would have gone out, all the way to Bethlehem, to family far and wide, announcing the date of the wedding. Mary's family, Joseph's family – from Nazareth to Bethlehem were alerted! Young Joseph has been betrothed to beautiful Mary. Word would have gone out, and family would need time to prepare and get there. Because there would be an important day coming with a wedding march and a wedding feast.

### **The Wedding March**

When the day of the wedding came, the Groom would fetch the Bride from her house and there would be a wedding march that would wind its way through the streets. And the bride would be adorned with all the finery that she had prepared. Often she would be held aloft overhead on a chair. If you were wealthy you would hire singers and musicians. It was a big deal.

In ancient Jewish culture, a wedding was a big deal. If you were a bystander observing this march, you would put whatever you were carrying down, and you would celebrate and dance and clap with the wedding march. It was a big deal. Jewish people participated in the wedding march.

And if you were invited, you had to dress for the occasion. Remember the guy in Matthew 22:11-12 who didn't dress for the wedding? He hadn't worn his wedding garment? They threw him out! So it would be an insult not to participate in the merriment of the wedding march. The day of the wedding ceremony is so important.

### **The Wedding Feast**

The wedding march would lead to the home that the groom has prepared for his bride, and there would be a wedding feast that would last for several days, like the wedding at Cana. During this time it's kind of like an open house. You bring gifts and food. And I'll say this delicately, but on the first night of the wedding feast, after the ceremony, the bride and groom would go come together physically.

### **Going Away for the Betrothal**

Everyone was invited. The family didn't come for the betrothal. They came for the wedding ceremony. ***Legally, the only thing that could end a betrothal was a divorce.*** They were man

and wife. Because of the temptation to carelessness, the bride would go away for a few months, and that's exactly what Mary did. She went away during her betrothal period to see Elizabeth for the last three months of her pregnancy. **Luke 1:56**, "And Mary stayed with her [Elizabeth] about three months; then she returned to her home."

### **Mary Showing**

But by the time Mary returned home, she was showing because she had been overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, and as a virgin conceived a baby. This was a miracle! But the public didn't perceive it that way. They perceived it the way you or I would perceive it. It didn't look like a miracle. It looked like a scandal!

### **From a Word of Joy to a Whisper of Scandal!**

Mary returns from Elizabeth's home, and she is showing. The wedding march and the wedding feast are cancelled. The word of joy that had gone out before was not a whisper of scandal! She is found with child. There has been no wedding march. There has been no wedding feast. She has not yet been brought into the wedding chambers. The word of joy has turned into a whisper of scandal!

### **The Bitter Plate of Mary**

Mary never got her wedding ceremony. Look again at **Matthew 1:18**, "Now 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. 19 Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly."

Pregnancy during the betrothal? It wasn't Joseph's baby. You know what this means? Scandal. That means ignominy and anger on the part of her family.

### **Mary's Name: Bitterness**

Mary's name means, "**Bitterness.**" Remember we just studied about Naomi and Ruth? And Naomi comes to town and says, "Don't call me Naomi (Sweetheart), call me Mara." Well that is the name "Mary." She says don't call me Sweetheart, call me Bitter woman. This Mary's name.

And Mary, the one who is now impregnated with a child conceived by the Holy Spirit, is given a great calling, but it is a bitter calling. Mary is named well. How sweet to be told by an angel that you are bearing the Son of God in your womb. But back here on earth there are bitter consequences to this.

This means divorce. This means scandal. What conflict there must have been in Mary's soul. We read this and we know the end of the story. We see the full redemptive plan of God flushed out, and we take comfort.

### **Take Comfort**

There are those of you here today who have been given bitter circumstances in the redemptive plan of God. Right now there doesn't seem to be anything good that can come out of this. Perhaps it's a lost opportunity, a difficult marriage, a life you thought you'd be living, but it never came to pass. You and Mary have a lot in common. Stay faithful. Trust God. The glorious end of the story of God's redemptive details for your life have not played out yet. **Trust a God who asks you to bear a bitter burden.** You can trust Him! The burden is temporary. **The glory is eternal!**

## Every Girl Dreams of Her Wedding

So we say, "Praise God, Mary gets to bear the Son of God." It's far more complicated emotionally than that.

What this means for Mary is there is no wedding day. Pure, chaste, innocent Mary did nothing wrong. Oh, she was a sinner like the rest of mankind, but she was blameless. She was a faithful young woman. Yet God had a calling for her. No more could she dream of that wedding day that many girls dream of. It would be like a nightmare. For all her purity and chastity she would be misunderstood. The Bible says, "A woman that fears the Lord, she shall be praised." But for all her fearing YHWH, she would be disregarded, despised, and vilified by her friends and family. Instead of a joyous wedding day, she would carry the ugly question mark of scandal all her days. At first, even Joseph was dismayed with Mary. Matthew 1:19, "Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly." He loved her. He knew her purity and chastity. So this was a shock. Obviously to Joseph and everyone else she must have been unfaithful.

## Tall Tales?

We've all heard stories of unmarried women who have tried to give a reason, maybe invent some tall tales for an unintended pregnancy, but this story beats them all. Who would have believed her? Even if Mary told Joseph it would not be believable.

Word has gone out, people are excited about the betrothal, but now we find out Mary is carrying a child, and Joseph is heartbroken.

## Queue the Angel!

Ok, queue the angel! Don't you wish in every bitter misunderstanding we could just queue an angel?! But that's what happened.

**Matthew 1:20-23**, "But as he [Joseph] 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~~ [not there] your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

<sup>23</sup> "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel."

The angel in verse 20 is saying, "Joseph, don't be afraid to take Mary, YOUR WIFE." Betrothal meant marriage. She was legally already his wife. And so there would be no dancing, no celebration. He'd likely have to go under cover of night. In fact, It is likely there is such shame that they have to flee Nazareth for good and settle in Bethlehem. He wouldn't have taken his pregnant wife with him unless they were MOVING to Bethlehem.

So Mary and Joseph knew of a certainty that this was of God. But the rest of the world did not. There would be the burden of scandal and misunderstanding to bear.

## **Mary Could Get Spat Upon or Stoned**

There's going to be no wedding march, no wedding feast. He'll have to get her by night. He doesn't want her spat upon or worse, stoned. There is a great burden of scandal that Mary has to bear and Joseph has to bear.

So let's look at Joseph's burden.

## **II. Joseph's Burden (Luke 2:1-7).**

Luke 2:1-7, "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration when [before] Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 And all went to be registered, each to his own town. 4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, 5 to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. 6 And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."

### **Ignominy, Disgrace, Dishonor for Joseph**

Here in Luke 2, we get some idea of the disgrace from Joseph's own clan. Here he is caring for this woman who is with child not by Joseph, but by the Holy Spirit. But to the community this was a scandal. This was a burden.

Mary insists that she has not done wickedly, but there is this public scandal to bear. Mary and Joseph are heartbroken.

### **Why Mary and Joseph Went to Bethlehem**

Mary and Joseph live in Nazareth. Most people at this time in human history, most people lived their whole lives in one town. Why would Mary and Joseph move themselves from Nazareth to Bethlehem which is 65 miles away? Only Joseph needed to go. Why would he bring his pregnant wife?

### **Joseph the Artisan**

We are told that Joseph is a TEKTONE, τέκτων in Matthew 13:55. "Isn't this Jesus the son of Joseph the TEKTON? (often translated carpenter). But it literally means "artisan. This comes to us as a translation as I said, as "carpenter". I'm sorry this is going to ruin the morning for some of you, but Joseph and Jesus were probably not carpenters. They were likely stone masons. The word is simply artisan, and it does not designate whether he was working with wood or stone. We have to look at the context of Nazareth at the time to find that out.

There is a problem with the idea of "carpenter" because there were no lumber grade trees in Israel, especially in Nazareth. There were only shrubs and stick-grade trees, but nothing to fashion furniture or building materials of any magnitude.

You didn't build anything with wood, you build it with stone. Their furniture

How do we know that he was likely a stone mason? Herod the Great dies in connection with Jesus' birth. It's not long after the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem that Herod the Great dies.

## **Herod the Great**

But Herod the Great was an architectural genius. He took a third rate, backwoods city, Jerusalem, and turned it into one of the most amazing marvels of the ancient world. He did this not only with the Temple in Jerusalem, but all over Israel.

## **Sepphoris**

One of the cities Herod was building was **Sepphoris**. Now it doesn't show up in the New Testament but Herod's goal was to make Sepphoris the crown jewel of Galilee and he was pumping all kinds of money and resources and people into building up Sepphoris. There was exquisite stone masonry.

## **Nazareth, the Low Rent District near Sepphoris**

Sepphoris is about five miles down the hill from Nazareth, not an unreasonable walk for a good days' wage. It is likely that both Mary and Joseph's families moved there because there was a solid paycheck, and Nazareth was the low rent district.

All work in Jesus' day was day work. There would be a work gang, going down the hill to Sepphoris, they would lay a wall, or something, get a day's wage, and return home.

## **65 Mile Journey to Bethlehem**

Now at this time they had to go to Bethlehem and register. And most people think it was a quick trip. Like he got a postcard or something – townhall, 5pm, be there on December 25 (kidding, Christmas almost positively NOT on Dec. 25).

## **Taxation**

This might sound crazy, but the reason they took the census was because the Roman government had spent themselves into poverty and the only thing they could think of to get themselves out of it was to tax their citizens more heavily. I know that sounds like an outlandish idea that we would never do today! Ha! Can you imagine these poor ancient people. We've come so far, or have we?!

## **Scandal**

The point is Mary and Joseph would have had about a year to get registered in Bethlehem. Why did they go there right before the time of her birth? Mary and Joseph must have determined to move to Nazareth. Why did he take Mary who was pregnant? He didn't have to take her there. It was because of the great scandal over Mary. They likely wanted a new start.

Luke 2:6, "while they were there, the time came for her to give birth." Who knows how long they had been there. It seems they decided to move there.

## **Life Unlivable in Nazareth**

The question is why? And of course, this is speculative. It seems life would have become entirely unlivable in Nazareth.

It could be that his family and friends in Nazareth said, "we are not interested in having you as part of our work gang. We want distance from you." And so with the census he likely decided to make a new start in Bethlehem.

### **No Room in the Inn?**

Look again in **Luke 2:6-7**, “And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”

A typical translation of Luke 2:7 says about Mary giving birth to Jesus, "And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn" (New King James Version).

We've grown up hearing the account that the "inn" in Bethlehem was full, with no "room" available, so Joseph and Mary ended up in a stable, with Jesus Christ born and laid in a manger there. This image has been used to promote the typical Christmas nativity scene for generations. Yet a careful analysis of the biblical text reveals quite a different story!

### **Not an Inn But a Guestroom**

The New Testament was originally written in Greek, and the Greek word translated "inn" here is kataluma. It means a place of rest, usually a guest room. It's not like they went to a Motel 6 or Best Western and there were no vacancies!

In fact, the same writer Luke uses this very word later where it clearly refers to a guest room and not an inn. Notice **Luke 22:11**, where Jesus said to His disciples, "Then you shall say to the master of the house, 'The Teacher says to you, "'Where is the guest room [ kataluma ] where I may eat the Passover with My disciples?'"

He came to Bethlehem looking for a place to stay with family in the guestroom, but there was no place for them. The scandal had preceded them! They were rejected in their own hometown of Bethlehem. – Rejected by family and friends!

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### **Utterly Rejected**

A manger? That's a feeding trough for animals. So likely they were put out in the cave where the animals were kept. The manger was likely not made of wood but of stone. We have tons of them in Spain where Jill and I lived.

The point is they were utterly rejected both in Nazareth as well as in Bethlehem. What a hardship to endure on the road to redemption.

### **III. God's Blessing (Luke 1:46-55).**

Before all this took place, what was Mary's reaction when informed by the angel that she would carry the Son of God.

#### **Luke 1:46-48**

“46 And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

48 for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.

For behold, from now on all generations will call me **blessed**;



### **From Bitter One to Blessed One**

Mary's name means bitter, but all generations will call her "blessed." She goes from bitterness to blessing. Was there a scandal she had to endure? Yes. But she trusted in the plan of God. She who was once called "Bitter one" would evermore be known as "Blessed one." Mary carried the Son of God in her womb. Those who carry Him in their hearts are just as blessed.

### **Luke 1:49ff**

49 for he who is mighty has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.  
50 And his mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.  
51 He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;  
52 he has brought down the mighty from their thrones  
and exalted those of humble estate;  
53 he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and the rich he has sent empty away.  
54 He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
55 as he spoke to our fathers,  
to Abraham and to his offspring forever."

### **Mary's Story is Our Story**

And Paul says we are Abraham's offspring and heirs to all the promises if we trust in this Christ child (Gal. 3:29). What can we say? We are all crushed by the bitterness of sin and need a Savior. But in Christ alone are we blessed. This blessedness all proceeds from God's sovereign grace that would choose a lowly virgin from Galilee to bear the Son of God. So too, he chooses the weak and despised still today to bear Him and manifest Him as Savior of the world. Mary's story is really one that every child of God can relate to. We are all turned from bitterness to blessing because of the grace that is in our Lord Jesus Christ!

**Conclusion:** A. W. Tozer put it this way: "Grace is the good pleasure of God that inclines Him to bestow benefits upon the undeserving...to pity the wretched, spare the guilty, welcome the outcast, and bring into favor those who were before under just condemnation. Its use to us sinful people is to save us and make us sit together in heavenly places to demonstrate to the ages the exceeding riches of God's kindness to us in Christ Jesus."