

## An Announcement to Joseph

Matthew 1:18–25

Advent 2016 #4

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**O**NE of the most memorable television shows of my childhood was “Ripley’s Believe it or Not.” It featured the enigmatic actor, Jack Palance, who would describe people and events that seemed unbelievable. At the end of each segment, he would say, “Believe it or not.” Some things sound so unbelievable, too good to be true that any rational human is led to say, “Believe it? Not.” But faith is not merely rational assent. Faith is trust. It is not merely rational assent to truth in theory but it is trust in a person—Jesus Christ.

Continuing through the announcement narratives of our Lord’s advent, we turn tonight to the Gospel of Matthew and read of an event that seems unbelievable: the virgin conception and birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. In verse 18 we have the background: **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.** Joseph and Mary were betrothed, which was the equivalent of our engagement; but it was more. It was a legal pledge to be married (Deut. 22:23–24) that was so binding that Joseph is already

called Mary's **husband** here in verse 19.<sup>1</sup> The actual marriage would then be complete after a ceremony and when Joseph would take Mary into his home. Because they had not yet consummated their commitment and Mary was pregnant, Matthew tells us that Joseph, **being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly** (v. 19), which was permitted in the law of God (cf. Num. 5:11–31).<sup>2</sup> But the Lord intervened in their relationship. This isn't the point of our text, but if the Lord needed to intervene in the relationship of the holy family we with ordinary relationships should be encouraged!

The big question I want to consider tonight in the announcement to Joseph is why did God use a virgin to bring his Son to this earth?

### **To Ensure Divinity**

The first reason why God used a virgin was *to ensure divinity*. How could the Savior be a human, but not a sinful human, while at the same time be divine? The Holy Spirit was needed and so was a virgin. We read that **as Joseph considered these things—including divorcing Mary—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**

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<sup>1</sup> Jerome, 61.

<sup>2</sup> On the exegetical options of Joseph being “just,” see Carson, 1:74–75.

**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). As Luke recorded, Gabriel told Mary, **“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God”** (Luke 1:35).

**From the Holy Spirit.** That’s it? Isn’t it amazing how there was so much detail about all the signs and wonders back in the days of Moses? Isn’t it amazing how the Gospel writer himself will go on to give so much detail about Jesus Christ’s greater signs and wonders? But when God did his greatest miracle of all in sending his Son, all we are told is that it is **from the Holy Spirit.**<sup>3</sup> The Holy Spirit wants us to be silent with our speculations. He wants us to be “stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD” (Ex. 14:13). This was and is God’s greatest wonder of all. As we sing, “O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.” Confess him! “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.” **From the Spirit.** This means very simply that this happened apart from the means of man. It was a divine work to bring

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<sup>3</sup> Chrysostom, 1:47–48. Ryle, 1:5.

the eternal and holy Son of God into this world as a human who was sinless.

How does this benefit me? Listen to our Heidelberg Catechism:

What benefit do you receive from the holy conception and birth of Christ? That He is our Mediator, and with His innocence and perfect holiness covers, in the sight of God, my sin wherein I was conceived and brought forth (HC, Q&A 36).

We need that covering today, amen? Believe it or not? Believe it!

## **To Fulfill Prophecy**

Children, how many of you like history and learning about old people?

You learn about Aristotle the ancient Greek philosopher. You learn about

Julius Caesar and the glory of the Roman Empire. You learn about

Christopher Columbus who sailed the ocean blue. You learn about Martin

Luther King, Jr., and his struggle to get our country to really believe that all

men are created equal. But children, despite everything these men did to

change human history, they were just men. Jesus is the eternal Son of God.

The second reason why God used a virgin was *to fulfill prophecy* made

hundreds and thousands of years before.

Matthew interprets the meaning of this event by pointing to the fact that it fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14. This prophecy was uttered some seven hundred years before the birth of our Lord. In those days the kingdom

of Judah was being assaulted by Syria and the kingdom of Israel. The Lord spoke through Isaiah to encourage Judah's king, Ahaz, that he had nothing to fear. But he feared. So the Lord asked Ahaz to ask for a sign of the Lord's promise. But Ahaz refused. What did the Lord do? He provided his own sign: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (Isa. 7:14). Ahaz's kingdom would come to an end. You see in verse 15 that this son would eat "curds and honey," which means that's all the food left after destruction. But a day was coming in which a king would be born to restore the kingdom and he would be Immanuel, which Matthew interprets for us as meaning, "God with us." And the sign that he had arrived was that a virgin would conceive a son.<sup>4</sup>

While Isaiah spoke in future tense of what would happen, Matthew wrote in the past tense, **all this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us) (vv. 22–23).**<sup>5</sup> Jesus is God with us. He is the Son of God who became the son of man. One of the great proofs of that is how Old Testament predictions hundreds and thousands of years before have come true in the

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<sup>4</sup> On the terms used in the OT/NT, see Carson, 1:77–81.

<sup>5</sup> Jerome, 63–64.

birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Believe it or not? Believe it!

## **Conclusion**

Let me conclude by speaking of your faith in the story of Jesus' birth. There was an English pastor in the seventeenth century, Joseph Hall, who wrote about this story: "The Spirit of God was never so accurate in any description, as that which concerns the incarnation of God. It was fit no circumstance should be omitted in that story, whereon the faith and salvation of all the world dependeth: we cannot so much as doubt of this truth, and be saved."<sup>6</sup> Your eternal destiny depends upon this story of this event. "But it's so unbelievable. How can I believe it?" You need to release your own wisdom and embrace God's wisdom. You need to become a fool that you might become wise. Back in Isaiah 7:14 the prophet said, "You [singular] shall call his name Immanuel." But here in Matthew 1:23 he interprets for us saying, **they shall call his name Immanuel**. Are you one of those **they**? Believe it or not? I pray you will answer, "I believe Jesus is God with us and me." Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Joseph Hall, 408 col 1.