

*Farmer Joe decided his injuries from the accident were serious enough to take the trucking company responsible for the accident to court.*

*In court, the trucking company's fancy lawyer was questioning Farmer Joe. "Didn't you say, at the scene of the accident, 'I'm fine'?" questioned the lawyer.*

*Farmer Joe responded, "Well, I'll tell you what happened. I had just loaded my favorite mule Bessie into the trailer," but the lawyer interrupted.*

*"I didn't ask for any details, just answer the question. Did you not say, at the scene of the accident, 'I'm fine'?"*

*Farmer Joe said, "Well, I had just got Bessie into the trailer and I was driving down the road..." and the lawyer interrupted again.*

*The lawyer then said to the judge, "Your Honor, I am trying to establish the fact that, at the scene of the accident, this man told the Highway Patrolman he was just fine. Now several months after the accident he is trying to sue my client. I believe he is a fraud. Please tell him to simply answer the question."*

*By this time the judge was fairly interested in Farmer Joe's answer and said to the lawyer, "I'd like to hear what he has to say about his favorite mule Bessie."*

*Farmer Joe thanked the judge and proceeded, "Well as I was saying, I had just loaded Bessie, my favorite mule, into the trailer and was driving her down the highway when this huge semi-truck and trailer ran the stop sign and smacked my truck right in the side. I was thrown into one ditch and Bessie was thrown into the other. I was hurting really bad and didn't want to move. However, I could hear ole Bessie moaning and groaning. I knew she was in terrible shape."*

*"Shortly after the accident, a Highway Patrolman came on the scene. He could hear Bessie moaning and groaning so he went over to her. After he looked at her, he took out his gun and shot her between the eyes. Then the Patrolman came across the road with his gun in his hand and looked at me. He said, 'Your mule was in such bad shape, I had to shoot her. How are you feeling?' It was then that I said, "I'm fine."*

If what I just shared teaches us anything, before we jump to conclusions, before we rush to judgment – which we are so prone to do, it's important we get more of the story. This morning I want to share a story – a Christmas story about a man who

needed a little more information to change his perspective on things and to believe the unbelievable. So, if you have your Bible, turn to **Matthew 1** and we will begin with **verses 18-19**. We are told,

**<sup>18</sup>Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup>And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly.**

This is the beginning of the Christmas story told by Matthew – a Jew, who was hated by his own people, considered the scum of the earth because he had collected taxes for the Romans and took a little extra for himself. Matthew was a traitor as far as the Jews were concerned, and now as an apostle, one of the original twelve disciples surprisingly chosen by Jesus – once a man who took from his own people, now wants to give a treasure back to them by sharing the truth about Jesus. The Gospel of Matthew was intended for a Jewish audience.

Matthew begins the story by telling us that Joseph was **betrothed** to Mary – meaning, in those days, they were legally pledged to one another, engaged to be married, and as was the Jewish custom, after the betrothal ceremony where their engagement became official, they were to separate for a year before their wedding. Mary returned to her parents' home to prove she was not pregnant before the wedding, and Joseph went back to his father's house and started to build an addition where he and Mary would eventually live one day as husband and wife.

So, everything seems to be going according to plan for these two, things are falling into place, but sometime after the betrothal ceremony, Mary got a surprise visit from the angel Gabriel, and in so many words, the angel told her,

*“Congratulations Mary – you’re going to be a mother. Your baby will be a boy, and His name will be Jesus. And oh, by the way – He is the Son of God – the long-awaited Messiah that you and your people have been hoping for. Just thought you might want to know that. He’s the King, not a king, but the King who will ultimately rule forever.”*

Well, after a little more information from Gabriel as to how this would supernaturally happen to her as she was a virgin, Mary replied to the angel, **“Behold, the bond slave of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word.”** In her reply, we could say that Mary handed God a blank sheet of paper with her name signed to the bottom of it, allowing God to fill in the details of His

plan for her life. That's what she did, and as a virgin, she conceived by the **Holy Spirit** just as the angel had said.

Now, keep in mind, at this point, Joseph had no knowledge of any of this, but eventually he learns that Mary, his beloved bride, is pregnant. We are not told how Joseph found out – we are only told **she was found to be with child**. Maybe Mary told Joseph about the visit from the angel early on, or maybe Mary kept it to herself and Joseph learned she was pregnant after she returned from her three-month visit with Elizabeth who was also pregnant. Whatever the case, however it happened, Joseph found out about it, and more importantly – he had nothing to do with it. Joseph knew the child that Mary was carrying was not his child.

**Can you imagine the conversation between Joseph and Mary?** In Max Lucado's book "*A Love Worth Giving*" he writes, Joseph finds out that Mary is pregnant. He hasn't had any great revelation yet. **What is he to think? What would you think if you were that man?** You've fallen in love with this pretty young girl. You do all the right things. You pursue her in the proper customary way. You've talked with her about dreams for a future together. A house. A family. And then out of the blue you learn that this sweet girl (you thought you knew so well) is pregnant. Newly pregnant. And you don't know who the father is – but there is one person you know you can rule out! **How does it make you feel? Angry? Betrayed?**

**What would you have thought if you were that man or as her parents, your young teenage daughter told you she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit? How could anyone be expected to believe the unbelievable?**

Joseph didn't believe it. He logically assumed, just like we would, Mary had been with another man, either voluntarily or maybe she was sexually assaulted, but her crazy made up story didn't help matters and led him to assume the worst. Joseph loved Mary, but at this point, he could no longer imagine a life with her and he planned to break off the engagement.

Now today, if you're engaged and things don't work out, you can just break it off and go your separate ways with no strings attached, but in that culture, things were completely different.

According to Old Testament law, specifically in **Deuteronomy 22**, Joseph could have publicly exposed Mary in open court for allegedly cheating on him while engaged to her and had her stoned to death by the men of the city. That was an option Joseph had – it was a rare option, but a very real option none the less.

The other option was a divorce. In those days, being engaged, being betrothed was legally binding and to break it off required a filing for divorce. They took an engagement very seriously – it was as legal as a marriage, and if Joseph wants out of it, he has to file for divorce. Unfortunately, this would expose Mary to terrible shame and disgrace in front of her family and her friends, leaving her future in serious jeopardy, and that was apparently too troubling for Joseph to consider.

We are told that Joseph was a **righteous man**, which does not speak about his *perfection* because he was not perfect, but rather it speaks about his *direction* – his walk towards God. Simply put, it describes a person who wants to do what is right towards God and so, without any malice or revenge on his part, he **planned to send her away secretly**. In other words, Joseph could no longer stay with Mary and so he planned to divorce her quietly, possibly out of town, under the radar so to speak, with only a few witnesses, to protect Mary’s reputation the best he could and avoid a huge scandal.

For Joseph, this was a bad as it gets, but he wants to do the honorable thing for Mary so they can go their own separate ways, and hopefully start over even though it’s just a matter of time before people eventually put two and two together and figure it out, and we know this was the case for one day Jesus was having a conversation with some people who wrongly thought they were righteous in God’s eyes simply because they were religious and related to Abraham, and in this conversation, in **John 8:41**, these self-righteous religious people said this to Jesus:

**“We were not born of fornication; we have one Father: God.”**

This was a dig on Mary – insinuating that she had been unfaithful to Joseph, and that’s what Joseph is thinking at this point. For Joseph, it would be impossible to stay with Mary, for as far as he knew, she had been unfaithful and untruthful, but he did not want to hurt her even though he was hurt, so he planned to divorce her secretly and quietly. That’s what’s going on in his mind, but Joseph was still unsettled about it. He was still troubled.

Let’s see what happens next. Look at **verses 20-21**.

**<sup>20</sup>But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of 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.”**

Joseph had a plan to send Mary away, but things just didn't add up for him, and he continued to wrestle with it in his mind, and while he was wrestling with it, he fell asleep, and then it got interesting.

We are told an angel appeared to Joseph in a **dream**, maybe it's Gabriel again, because Joseph needed something more – and something more is what the angel brought. **Joseph, son of David** – I know who you are, **do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife** – for I also know what you are thinking. Mary has not been unfaithful to you as you have assumed. Yes, she has conceived, but not because she was unfaithful, but to the contrary, because she was faithful – she believed God, and as unbelievable as it may sound to you Joseph, the child has been conceived by the **Holy Spirit**.

The angel continues and tells Joseph, Mary will have a Son, and Joseph – you will name Him **Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins**.

Joseph – Jesus has a purpose. Not to start a holiday but to save people from their sins. I mentioned last week that the good news of Christmas is really good when we realize we are not so good and need a Savior. We are all sinners by nature and by choice, every single one of us, and we cannot save ourselves. We are helpless and hopeless, and if that's not bad enough, there is a death penalty for sin – for all sin. Jesus came for a reason – to save us from the power and the penalty of sin. He was the sacrificial Lamb that God had sent to take away the sins of the world. Jesus would grow up, lead a sinless life in a sinful world, and He willingly paid our sin debt in full by His own death on the cross. Christmas is much more than a baby in a manger. We cannot separate the manger from the cross or we miss the reason behind Christmas.

Earlier, I told you that Matthew was a Jew and his intended audience for this gospel were Jews, and with that in mind, Matthew breaks in for a moment – this is not coming from the angel, and he gives a commentary in **verses 22-23**. He says,

<sup>22</sup>Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: <sup>23</sup>**“BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL,”** which translated means, **“GOD WITH US.”**

Here, Matthew inserts a divinely inspired comment for his Jewish readers who he knows full well will find it hard to believe this unbelievable story. **Really Mary, a virgin, conceived by the Holy Spirit?** That's a good one. **Has anyone ever heard**

of such a thing? It's craziness – to which Matthew would reply, “*Look in your own Scripture,*” and he quotes what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah some 700 years prior. A child would be born to a **virgin**, the Son of God would take on a body of flesh, He would maintain the kingly line of David forever, and He would be with us – “**IMMANUEL**” – that is the description of who Jesus is – **God with us**. Matthew is telling them; this unbelievable story was in keeping with prophecy from their own book – the Old Testament. This was the fulfilment of a promise from God they should know, **so why would this be so hard to believe?**

*A man stayed home as his family went off to church one snowy Christmas Eve. He just could not swallow the Jesus story about God coming to earth as man.*

*Shortly after the family drove away in the car, he went to the window to watch the flurries getting heavier and heavier, then went back to his fireside chair and began to read his newspaper.*

*Minutes later he was startled by a thudding sound. Then another and another. At first, he thought someone must be throwing snowballs against his living room window, but when he went to the front door, he found a flock of birds huddled miserably in the snow. They had been caught in the storm and in a desperate search for shelter they had tried to fly through his large living room window.*

*Well, he couldn't let the poor creatures lie there and freeze. He remembered the barn where his children stabled their pony. That would provide a warm shelter – if he could direct the birds to it. He quickly put on his coat and shoes, trampled through the deepening snow to the barn, opened the door wide, and turned on a light. But the birds did not come in. He figured food would entice them in and he hurried back to the house, fetched some bread crumbs, and sprinkled them on the snow making a trail to the wide-open doorway of the stable, but to his dismay the birds ignored the bread crumbs and continued to flap around helplessly in the snow. He tried catching them, he tried shooing them into the barn by walking around them waving his arms – instead they scattered in every direction except into the warm lighted barn.*

*Then he realized they were afraid of him. To them, he reasoned, I am a strange and terrifying creature, if only I could think of some way to let them know they can trust me – that I'm not trying to hurt them, but to help them. **How?** Any move he made tended to frighten them – confuse them. They just would not follow. They would not be led or shooed because they feared him. “If I could only be a bird myself,” he thought. “If only I could be a bird and mingle with them and speak*

*their language and tell them not to be afraid and show them the way to the safe, warm barn. But I'd have to be one of them, so they could see and hear and follow me," and it was then he understood what God did and why He had to do it.*

Think about it. History tells us that God performed signs and wonders and miracles, but His people dismissed them, made excuses for them, or quickly forgot they had ever happened. God spoke to His people, He sent prophets and messengers, but they refused listen, and in many cases, killed them. God put it on paper, wrote it all out in divinely inspired Scripture, but they wouldn't read it or they twisted it to support their own desires and agenda.

So, out of sheer love, Jesus stepped out of heaven and took on a body of flesh. On Christmas, He became like us. Jesus met us in a sinful world and yet He lived a sinless life, and then later, He took our sin upon Himself. Jesus came to us to save us from our sins – gave up His life for ours, so that we might be made right with God, become children of God, and experience eternal life – His life. The only way Jesus could save us from our sin was to leave heaven, to live among us, and to die for us – and that's what Christmas is all about.

In verses 24-25, we are told,

**<sup>24</sup>And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife, <sup>25</sup>but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus.**

Joseph believed the unbelievable, and **how do we know this?** Because what we believe determines what we do. Our beliefs influence our actions. Our behavior reflects what we truly believe. **For example, if we say we believe God and yet we live our lives as if He does not even matter, then what are we really saying?** Actions do speak louder than words. We are told Joseph believed God, and we know this because he obeyed God and took Mary as his wife.

Now you know the rest of the story. Joseph took Mary to Bethlehem because he had to register in his home town for a census.

Joseph wants to take care of his new wife, she's very pregnant by now, and he's desperate to find a room, any room, but it's completely useless because others have come from out of town as well to register for the census. There is no room anywhere. Nothing was panning out – they were homeless, and tradition tells us they likely had to stay in a cave where animals were being sheltered. **How gut-wrenching must that have been for Joseph?** Without family, without friends, and

without a midwife to help, Mary delivered the Deliverer. Then Jesus was wrapped in cloth and laid in a feeding trough.

Surely, this isn't what Joseph had imagined for the Son of God. No huge celebration. No fanfare. No parade. No banquet. For Joseph, nothing except for some animals and few shepherds who showed up a little later – but that's what God does – He does the unexpected, the unimaginable, and the unbelievable.

Eight days later, Joseph took his new family to the temple to dedicate the baby, and it was there that the baby was officially given the name **Jesus** by Joseph, for in that culture, it was the duty of the father to give the name, and in doing so, Joseph would go on record and accept Jesus as his own.

Isn't that what God desires for each of us – that we too would accept Jesus as our own? We need to. The Apostle Paul tells us in **Acts 4:12**,

**“And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.”**

That's why Jesus came. That's what Christmas is really all about. God sent a gift, His own Son, so that we might be saved.

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