

“They Shall Call His Name Immanuel” (Matt. 1:18–25)

By Jacob D. Gerber

For Matthew, the preceding genealogy was not a begrudging preamble to his Gospel. Rather, what Matthew wrote in the first 17 verses of this Gospel are a critical introduction to the story he intends to relate. Matthew has a story to tell that can only be understood in the context of Israel’s history, since the story of Jesus is the climax and culmination of that history. Now that Matthew has given the backstory leading up to Jesus, he is ready to tell the story of the birth of Jesus in its proper context. Jesus, as we will see, is not just one more link in the genealogical chain descending from Abraham. Jesus certainly is the offspring of Abraham, but he is much more. In this section, Matthew relates to us a critical truth for understanding the person and work of Jesus Christ: *Jesus is God with us*.

God with us as Stumbling Block (Matt. 1:18–19)

In v. 18, to demonstrate the connection with the preceding genealogy, Matthew repeats the word γένεσις (*genesis*; ESV: “the birth”) from v. 1 (and, from the entire genealogy in the verbal form of the word, γεννάω; *gennaō*).¹ Matthew declared that he was writing the “book of the *genesis* of Jesus Christ,” and the repetition of *genesis* in v. 18 suggests that he has now reached the “goal” of the history.² Some commentators see also a more subtle connection in the reversed order of the names Joseph → Mary → Jesus Christ (v. 16), to Jesus Christ → Mary → Joseph in v. 18.³ Matthew wants us to read the infancy narratives of Jesus as the culmination and climax of the great history of Abraham’s offspring that passed up to this point.

Importantly, Matthew is telling us about the birth of Jesus from *Joseph’s* perspective, and not as much from *Mary’s* perspective, which Luke records for us.⁴ Indeed, in the opening genealogy, Matthew left an unanswered question about Joseph’s relationship to Jesus: if Joseph is the rightful heir to David’s throne, then what do we make of the strange, passive way in which Mary was said to have been the one “of whom Jesus was born”?⁵ So, in v. 18, Mary’s name is mentioned first, but only in order to inform us of her relationship to Joseph: she had been *betrothed* to Joseph, but they had not yet *come together* . This arrangement for the ancient Jews was very different from modern wedding engagements, since betrothed people were understood as legally married, albeit in a restricted sense

¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 39.

² Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 17.

³ Osborne, *Matthew*, 74.

⁴ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 38.

⁵ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 47.

so that the couple did not yet live together, and refrained from sexual intercourse.⁶ To separate from this arrangement was not merely a breaking off of an engagement, but required a legal divorce. In this case, Matthew informs us that Joseph seemingly had cause for such a divorce, since, “before they came together she was found to be with child....”

Mary’s pregnancy would certainly have come as a devastating shock to Joseph, for Joseph would have known that he was not the father—indeed, Matthew explicitly tells us that Joseph is a “just man” in v. 19, which “puts in him in the same class with Zacharias and Elisabeth who were ‘righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless,’ [and] makes him like Simeon who was ‘righteous and devout.’”⁷ Joseph, then, faced a difficult choice. By all outward appearances, Mary had been unfaithful to him. Even if he was willing to forgive Mary, he could not move forward with the wedding without seeming to claim responsibility for Mary’s pregnancy.⁸ Nevertheless, Joseph was also “unwilling to put her to shame” by a public trial that may have led to her being stoned for her infidelity (v. 19; cf. John 8:5).⁹ Because he did not desire to put her through all that, he instead made a decision: he would privately divorce her through the easy divorce provisions of the day that only required a husband to give his wife a letter of divorce (cf. Matt. 19:7).¹⁰

Matthew, however, gives us another detail that clarifies the nature of the whole situation: Mary “was found to be with child *from the Holy Spirit*” (v. 18). Luke gives us the full story of how Gabriel informed Mary that she would become pregnant apart from the agency of any human father (Luke 1:26–38), which Matthew concisely corroborates here.¹¹ Mary both knew that Joseph had not been the father, as well as the true origin of the child in her womb.¹² As for Joseph, we are not told whether he is unaware of this information, or whether he simply cannot bring himself to believe it. The popular idea that the early church was credulous to believe in a virgin birth because they lived before the advent of modern reproductive science makes no attempt to understand the tension of this passage: even without knowledge of sperm and eggs, Joseph resolved to divorce Mary because he knew that women only ever get pregnant in one way.¹³ We are seeing here the only exception to this process in history, so even if Mary did explain her situation to Joseph, it is not surprising that he would have struggled to believe it.

It is important to note that Jesus Christ has always been a stumbling block to those who walk by sight. Joseph had no reason whatsoever, humanly speaking, to believe that the child in Mary’s womb was the Son of God. This is a fact that can only be revealed by God—it is not a truth that human beings can discover by their own reason. God delights in this, as Paul explains: “For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe” (1 Cor. 1:21). To Joseph’s credit (as we will see), when he

⁶ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 130.

⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 42.

⁸ Carson, “Matthew,” 100.

⁹ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 96.

¹⁰ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 52.

¹¹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 26.

¹² Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 130.

¹³ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 58.

receives this revelation from God, he gladly sets aside what he believed by outward appearances, and he immediately believes and obeys. Today, though, we are still faced with the same dilemma: will we trust in the outward appearances of our circumstances, or will we trust God’s word, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and the Son of David?

God with us as Savior (Matt. 1:20–23)

The language of v. 19 suggests that Joseph had *already* made the decision to divorce Mary before the angel appears to him in a dream in v. 20.¹⁴ In light of the opening genealogy, it is stunning to see the way the angel addresses Joseph: “Joseph, *son of David*...” (v. 20). Matthew does not let us look past Joseph here, but instead forces us to understand an important principle: the genealogy of v. 1–26 is *Joseph’s* genealogy, and *Joseph* is the son of David.¹⁵ By addressing Joseph in this way, the angel was calling to mind the great promises of God in his covenant with David to establish his kingdom through the offspring of David.¹⁶ In the context of Joseph’s decision, the angel is also confronting the implications of divorcing Mary: Jesus would be cut off from the legal status as the son of David, and therefore (humanly speaking) legally and covenantally barred from reigning as king over Israel.¹⁷

To prevent this, the angel tells Joseph not to fear taking Mary as his wife, and explains to Joseph the nature of Mary’s pregnancy: “for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit” (v. 20). This fact takes away the scandal and proving Mary’s innocence in all this. Then, the angel continues, declaring that Mary “will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (v. 21). Interestingly, when the angel had spoken of the child conceived in Mary, he did not use a masculine term, but instead a neuter term, so that the ESV’s translation is very good: “*that which* is conceived in her....” John Nolland plausibly suggests a reason for this: “The neuter form τὸ...γεννηθῆν (‘what has been produced’) is probably chosen to keep back the gender of the child until it can be revealed with emphasis in v. 21.”¹⁸

More than a son, the angel tells Joseph what the name of this child should be, as well as the significance of the name. Named *Jesus*, this child will “save his people from their sins.” The name “Jesus” is the Greek form of the Hebrew name “Joshua,” which means, “Yahweh saves.” Of course, the name “Joshua” stirs up great memories of the one to lead Israel into the Promised Land in the Old Testament. That Joshua, however, was simply a servant of the Lord, who led the Israelites to enjoy and to enter into *God’s* salvation. In this case, the angel states emphatically that *he*—Jesus—will be the one to save his people.¹⁹ Furthermore, the angel is explicit about the nature of this salvation: “from their sins.” Leon Morris writes, “Matthew does not use the word ‘sin’ very often (7 times), but the expression here shows that he regarded it as an important concept. Jesus came to deal with *sins*, and his name gives expression to a very significant truth.”²⁰ As the rest of the New Testament

¹⁴ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 52.

¹⁵ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 131.

¹⁶ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:97.

¹⁷ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 53.

¹⁸ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 97.

¹⁹ Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 19.

²⁰ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 30.

explains, this salvation from sins has two parts: first, to atone for our sins, so that we may be forgiven in *justification*; and second, to deliver us from the power of sin over our lives, so that we may grow in *sanctification*.²¹

Then, the angel explains that this birth is not a novel concept, but that it happens to fulfill Scripture—specifically, to fulfill Isaiah 7:14: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us)” (v. 23). There is a real question in the commentaries as to what sense Christ’s birth is the fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14. Without going too deeply into various theories of inspiration or prophecy, we must affirm that Matthew is explaining to us God’s intention all along for Isaiah 7:14, rather than force-fitting Isaiah 7:14 into a context that works against its original intention. Even so, Isaiah 7:14 was given as a sign to the Judah’s king Ahaz, so there must have been some original, initial fulfillment to the prophecy as well—some a young virgin who married, and then gave birth to a son. Nevertheless, that fulfillment was only partial and provisional until the coming of Jesus, who is the ultimately referent of the prophecy.²²

The name “Immanuel” will not be a name people use to address Jesus, but only an explanation of who Jesus is: he *is* God with us. R. T. France observes that halfway through the book, Jesus will declare that, “where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them” (Matt. 18:20), and that at the end of the book, Jesus will declare, “behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20).²³ Where in the Old Testament, “Immanuel” had been a reminder of God’s spiritual presence with his people, Matthew is explaining the deeper significance of the name in regard to Jesus: “Jesus’ declaration in 28:20 is only drawing out what has already been true from the time of his birth, that God is present in the person of Jesus. Matthew’s overt interpretation of ‘Immanuel’ thus takes him close to an explicit doctrine of the incarnation such as is expressed in John 1:14.”²⁴

God with us as Son of David (Matt. 1:24–25)

In response to the clarification he receives from the angel, Joseph immediately does all that he has been commanded after waking from the dream: “When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus” (vv. 24–25). John Calvin makes an important observation in comparing Joseph’s determination to divorce Mary *before* the dream, and his direct obedience to marry Mary *after* the dream: namely, that Joseph’s change of heart makes him a more competent witness about the virgin birth of Christ: “while the groundless accusation of his wife was still rankling in his mind, God interposed between them, that we might regard Joseph as a more competent witness, and possessing greater authority, as a messenger sent to us from heaven.”²⁵ Joseph acted faithfully at every moment in this story—first by resolving to divorce Mary justly and quietly based on the natural conclusion that Mary had been unfaithful; and second, by proceeding to marriage once the angel had given supernatural information that Mary had been faithful to Joseph and to God.

²¹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:99.

²² cf. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 135–36.

²³ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 49.

²⁴ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 49.

²⁵ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:95.

R. C. H. Lenski powerfully captures the full scope of Joseph’s actions: “by taking possession of his wife, bringing her to his own home, Joseph would do God’s will, serve God’s Son, shield and protect the mother of his Lord, himself receive a thousand blessings, and show himself a true prince of David’s line.”²⁶ Again, in Matthew’s account, Joseph is the one in view, and he acquits himself magnificently, acting with extraordinary honor. He lives up to his status as a son of David. Furthermore, though, by marrying Mary and adopting her son, Joseph extends to Jesus the legal status as the son of David as well.²⁷ Thus, it is not until the conclusion of the first chapter until we see how the status of “son of David” (Matt. 1:1) is true for Jesus: through Joseph’s adoption of Jesus.²⁸ While Matthew makes clear that Joseph did not know Mary sexually “until” she had given birth to Jesus, Matthew does not say anything here about the time after Mary’s virgin birth. Later, Matthew tells us that Jesus had brothers and sisters (Matt. 13:55–56), so we may presume that Joseph and Mary engaged in normal marital relations; however, that is not Matthew’s point here.

Discussion Questions

1. What did the Jewish custom of betrothal entail, and how does it differ from a modern engagement (v. 18)? What all does Matthew relate to us about Joseph’s conflicted state of mind as he grapples with Mary’s pregnancy (v. 19)? Was Joseph right to decide to divorce Mary? Why or why not? How does Matthew present Jesus as a stumbling block to his people right out of the gate? How does this shape how we should understand Jesus’ opposition in the rest of the Gospel?
2. Why does the angel address Joseph as “son of David” (v. 20)? What rationale does the angel give to soothe Joseph’s fears about taking Mary as his wife (v. 20)? What does the name “Jesus” mean (v. 21)? How does the angel confirm this New Testament revelation with prophetic revelation from the Old Testament (v. 22–23)? What is the significance of the title “Immanuel” (“God with us”) in relation to Jesus?
3. How does Joseph respond to God’s revelation to him in relation to Mary (v. 24–25a)? How does Joseph respond to God’s revelation in relation to Jesus (v. 25b)? What is the significance of Joseph’s naming Jesus? Why is it important theologically for Joseph, the son of David, to adopt Jesus (cf. Matt. 1:1)? If Luke presents the exemplary faith of Mary, how does Matthew present the exemplary faith of Matthew?
4. Why is Jesus a stumbling block to faith still today? Can human wisdom come to understand who Jesus is, and what he came to accomplish, on its own? Why does God appoint his word as the critical means of revealing saving knowledge of Jesus Christ? Why do people persist in unbelief against God’s word? What does it mean for you personally that Jesus came to save his people from their sins? What does it mean for you personally that Jesus is Immanuel, “God with us”?

²⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 46.

²⁷ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 59.

²⁸ Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 21.