

**A Change of Plans – Matthew 1:18-25**  
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**I. INTRODUCTION: MATTHEW'S ACCOUNT OF THE BIRTH OF JESUS CHRIST  
(1:18a)**

Turn with me, if you would, to Matthew chapter 1, verses 18 to 25, where we'll be focused today on the only passage outside of Luke that provides us with an account of the events surrounding the birth of Jesus Christ. In contrast to Luke's focus on Mary's perspective, Matthew zeros in Joseph's experience and gives us an idea of how God's unusual plan unfolded in the everyday life of Joseph... Of how the kingdom of the heavens burst in upon Joseph and turned his life and plans upside down. I've called today's message, "A Change of Plans."

Has God ever changed your life plans and ushered in a completely different future than you had envisioned? A better question might be: When has God not changed the plans you had? I'm reminded of that verse in Proverbs 19 verse 21: ***Many plans are in a man's heart, but the counsel of the Lord will stand.*** We make our plans, we envision our ideal future, but quite often God has a different idea and has much bigger things he wants to accomplish within us and through us than we could ever imagine. And the plans we make usually don't involve pain and humiliation and inconvenience. How often have you planned on suffering or experiencing persecution or being shamed in front of other people? And yet doesn't Scripture say:

***Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing*** (James 1:2-4).

***And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us*** (Romans 5:3-5).

Somehow we just don't usually incorporate trials and tribulation into our plans, but God's plans for us always seem to involve them. Why? Because we live in a cursed world, for one. But also, because trials and tribulations grow our faith; they build character; they keep us humble; they keep our eyes turned to God; and they allow us to see the power of God at work as he sustains us, gives us joy in the middle of pain and suffering, enables us to persevere through the hard times, and through it all makes us more like Christ...giving us hope as we see the fruit of God's work in our lives. Trials and tribulations give us an opportunity to show the world that our faith is real and powerful.

Well, God's plan for Joseph definitely included trials and tribulations and Joseph experienced a major change of plans here in Matthew chapter 1. We're going to learn some powerful truths today as we watch God's plans unfold and how Joseph responded to a radically different future than he had envisioned.

Beginning in verse 18, Matthew opens with a brief and concise statement giving us the focus of the verses we'll be studying today:

***Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows:***

Pretty straightforward, isn't it? Matthew is going to tell us in 8 verses some key information about how the birth of Jesus Christ came about.

## **II. JOSEPH DISCOVERS THAT MARY IS PREGNANT (1:18b)**

Matthew continues in verse 18:

***When His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit.***

One ordinary day, while walking with the Lord and seeking to follow him, while waiting patiently for his upcoming wedding day and anticipating a great future with a godly woman named Mary, while anticipating blessing as he tried to follow God's ways, Joseph made a troubling discovery: his supposedly godly fiancée was pregnant. Whether it just became obvious when Mary returned from a 3-month visit with her cousin Elizabeth, or whether Mary just informed him that she was

pregnant, we don't know. But by all appearances it seemed to Joseph that Mary had been unfaithful to him. This was definitely not in the plans Joseph had made.

Do you think he may have wondered why? Why would you allow this to happen, God, when I'm trusting in you and trying to follow your ways? Perhaps Mary told him that wild story about an angel appearing to her and telling her she would become pregnant by the Holy Spirit. But whatever the case, Joseph came to the conclusion that Mary had been unfaithful and decided the marriage couldn't go forward.

### **III. JOSEPH, A JUST MAN, MAKES A PLAN (1:19)**

But Joseph wasn't just an ordinary man of the day. He was a man who was trusting in God and being transformed by God's grace. Let's continue on in verse 19:

***And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly.***

According to Jewish law, Joseph would have been justified to publicly shame Mary and have her stoned for adultery. He could have considered righteous anger justified and carried out justice on the spot. But we're told that Joseph was a righteous man. This does not mean that he was sinless. The usage of the Greek word here signifies being without prejudice or partiality, the idea being that he was walking in God's ways and relating to people like God would relate to them. And the way he responded to Mary here is indeed very similar to the way Jesus later related to the woman caught in adultery. Jesus didn't justify her sin and say it was OK, but he also didn't publicly shame her and have her stoned...he related to her with mercy and love and told her to go and sin no more.

Similarly, Joseph loved Mary and had no desire to publicly shame her or carry out justice. Remember, people who have walked with God throughout history were never perfect or sinless, but rather were people who recognized their weaknesses and failures and looked to God for grace and mercy. As a man who was walking with God, Joseph knew his own weaknesses and failures and need for God's grace and was able to relate to Mary the way God related to him. In the face of what appeared to be unfaithfulness to him on the part of Mary, he still desired what

was best for her and decided to call off the marriage quietly and move on. This was Joseph's Plan B. But once again, God had other plans. Plan B wasn't meant to be.

#### **IV. GOD SENDS AN ANGEL TO CHANGE JOSEPH'S PLAN (1:20a)**

Enter Plan C. Sometimes it takes us quite a while to arrive at the plan God has had all along. So often we're confident in Plans A and B and then, BEHOLD, God does something that changes everything and sends us back to the drawing board. As Joseph retired for the night having made his plans to send Mary away quietly, he drifted off to sleep having no idea he was about to meet with an angel sent from God. Having made his own plans, BEHOLD, God was about to show him a much better way to move forward. We pick up with the first part of verse 20:

***20 But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream...***

Behold, an angel in a dream. And this wasn't a dream that Joseph struggled to recollect when he got up in the morning. It wasn't the type of dream that seemed so real while he was sleeping, but was then just out of reach of remembering when he woke up. Have you ever experienced that? That happens to me all the time. But this was a dream that stuck with Joseph and that he was able to recount word for word. What Joseph heard and experienced in this dream was enough to convince him that Mary's pregnancy was a work of the Holy Spirit and not the result of unfaithfulness on Mary's part, and to completely change the plans he had been so sure of the night before. Joseph knew he had met with an angel and heard a direct message from God.

#### **V. GOD'S MESSAGE TO JOSEPH THROUGH THE ANGEL (1:20b-1:21)**

Well, what did the angel have to say to Joseph? What was the message from God? Let's continue on with verses 20 and 21:

***20 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. 21 "She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."***

In this dream the angel addressed him as Joseph, son of David, pointing to the significance of his being in the kingly line of David. Then the angel got right down to business. He gave Joseph two commands and with each command he provided a reason for that command. He also shared a prophecy with Joseph.

The first command Joseph received from the angel was that he should not be afraid to take Mary as his wife. Though people will talk and to all appearances it looks as if either Mary has been unfaithful or the two of you have been involved in immorality, don't be afraid to take her as your wife. In other words, don't allow what people will think to keep you from doing God's will. Have you ever gone down that path? It's so easy, isn't it, to live our lives by what people will think instead of only concerning ourselves with what God will think?

Well, the reason why Joseph didn't need to be afraid to take Mary as his wife was because the child in her womb was conceived by the Holy Spirit, not by immorality. God knew the truth and that was what mattered, not what people would think. God was asking Joseph to put aside his pride and his reputation to follow God's will no matter what the cost...no matter what people might say or think. He was asking Joseph to give up trying to please and impress people and to just do what was right, leaving it up to God to bring the truth out in his time.

Can you imagine how people must have talked? To the world around them Mary and possibly Joseph had committed a serious sin was punishable by death under Jewish law. And it's very clear that precious few, if any, bought into the *conception-by-the-Holy-Spirit* story, even if Mary and Joseph tried to explain that to anyone. If people had accepted that story, don't you think they would've been gathered around when the baby was born to see who this baby was and what a baby conceived by the Holy Spirit looks like? But instead we see Mary giving birth quietly with no fanfare in a rustic stable of Bethlehem.

The angel also gave a prophecy to Joseph, one that agreed with what Mary had been told in her encounter with the angel, Gabriel. The prophecy was that the baby that had been conceived in Mary was a boy; Mary would have a Son. And the angel didn't need an ultrasound machine to figure this out! Before

ultrasounds, I guess the only way you could figure out if you were going to have a boy or girl was if God told you!...probably not a very common occurrence.

And then the angel gave Joseph a second command and a reason for it. Joseph was told that he was to call the Son's name Jesus, and this was to be his name because he would save his people from their sins. Last week we talked about the meaning of this name, Jesus...or Yeshua. The name means "Jehovah is salvation." Jehovah is the common English translation of the Hebrew name for God, "Yahweh," which means: "I Am; or the eternal Living One." Yahweh is salvation. Jesus was to be called a name meaning "Yahweh is salvation" because he would save people.

This is a mind-blowing indication to Joseph and to us who this child was to be. If Yahweh, the eternal Living God, is the one who saves, and then we're told that Jesus will save, the logical conclusion is that this child, Jesus, must be God. Who can save people from their sins but God alone? The Jewish religious leaders certainly held this view. Remember when Jesus forgave a man his sins and they were appalled because no one but God could do such a thing?

We also see in this statement from the angel that people need saving. Every person in the world needs to be saved from their sins. And this coming child, Jesus, would be the One who could do it! Joseph was getting an astonishing picture of who Mary's son was to be and, as we'll see shortly, it impacted him profoundly.

## **VI. THE REASON WHY ALL THIS HAPPENED: TO FULFILL A PROPHECY OF ISAIAH (1:22-23)**

At this point it appears the dream ended. Joseph had been given the information he needed and the angel went on his way. And Matthew follows up the account of Joseph's dream by providing us with the reason why all this happened. In verses 22 to 23, he says:

***22 Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 23 "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."***

It's kind of like Matthew's saying: Just in case you're not familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures or if perhaps you are and just need a refresher or maybe a good conk on the head to wake you up; remember that mysterious sign God promised through the prophet Isaiah? That one the rabbis have been debating for hundreds of years? It had to do with a virgin, a woman who had never been with a man, having a baby, a son in fact; and that people would call him a perplexing name, one that means "God with Us." I mean, how could a human being, a son born of a woman, be called, "God with Us?" That's been troubling the rabbis for several hundred years. And then there's the idea of a virgin having a baby. How could that ever happen?

Well, Matthew says, I have a newsflash for all of you reading my book. In case you missed it, God just did it. He fulfilled this mysterious prophecy to a "T" and his name is Jesus, and he's God himself who's come to save you from your sins! I've got the name of the virgin and her sworn testimony of all that happened, and I have the eyewitness report from her husband, Joseph, who testifies that he kept Mary a virgin until the baby was born and personally received confirmation of God's plan and information about who this child was to be ahead of time. And I'm just getting started! Keep reading and you're going to meet the long-awaited Messiah and see what powerful signs and wonders God performed through him while he walked the earth! You're going to find out how to be permanently saved from your sins!

## **VII. JOSEPH'S RESPONSE OF COMPLETE OBEDIENCE (1:24-25)**

So after Matthew's little wake-up call and teaser to his readers, he returns to Joseph and what happened after his encounter with an angel in his dream. Let's finish up with verses 24 and 25:

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

I don't see any more hesitation or planning going on with Joseph, do you? Plans A and B were out the window and God's plan was front and center. In this account of Joseph, we see a very similar response to God's revelation as we saw with Mary last week: complete obedience and submission to the will of God, come what

may! Joseph woke up, took Mary as his wife, kept her a virgin until the baby was born, watched the fulfillment of God's ultrasound report through the angel, and named him Jesus as instructed by the angel.

And don't underestimate what it cost Joseph to follow God's plan. He was signing himself up for the appearance of evil. Very likely against the wishes and instructions of his respectable family, he agreed to marry a woman whom everyone in that culture had judged as immoral. He opened himself up to rumors and suspicions and destruction of his reputation, and the belief of many people that perhaps he had been immoral too. He, along with Mary, had to have endured many judging glances and false accusations from the people around them.

And what point would there have been in trying to convince them that this baby was conceived by the Holy Spirit? People would have only added, "crazy," or, "insane," to their description of sinful Mary and Joseph. And this judgment against them by family and friends and the community around them probably endured for years, even after the baby was born. This unquestioning, unwavering, full obedience of Joseph to God's commands through the angel, demonstrate his trust in God and the way God was transforming his life through the power of his grace.

## **VIII. APPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

So what can we take away today from Matthew's description of the birth of Christ? Well, one big thing for me is the reminder that our focus is always to be on walking with and pleasing God, not people. I tend to be a people-pleaser. I want people to like me and I'm often overly concerned with what people will think about actions I take or if I say no to something others view as important. This account of Joseph and Mary and the impossibility of them avoiding the negative opinions and judgments of other people, is a reminder to me that I just need to concern myself with discerning God's will and following it, even when people may not like it or may make inaccurate judgments about me.

Has anyone ever told you that as Christians we're to avoid all appearance of evil? That statement comes from an erroneous translation of 1 Thessalonians 5:22. I would say it's one of the most commonly quoted verses of all time and is often



used to try and restrict many things that are not evil or bad in themselves, but may appear that way to other people. It often ends up being a legalistic rule that Christians use to try and tell other Christians what they can and can't do in gray areas. A better translation of the verse from the original Greek is this: "abstain from every form of evil." In other words, stay away from evil in all its forms.

There are many times in our lives, and definitely in Joseph and Mary's lives, when there is an appearance of evil to those who don't know the truth. To everyone but Mary and Joseph, it looked like they had been involved in immorality, but in reality they had not. In fact, they had been as faithful to God as human beings can be. They had no control over the appearance of evil. There was nothing they could do about it. But what they could do, was steadfastly continue to do God's will and trust God to bring the truth out in his timing. If God was concerned about what might appear to be evil to people, would he have brought about the conception of Jesus in the way he did? No. God's concerned about simple trust and obedience from the heart, and whether or not people jumped to false conclusions based on things they didn't understand was irrelevant.

Similarly for us, we cannot live our lives for God's glory if our primary concern is what people will think or with projecting an image that we have it all together. Our primary concern needs to be following God where he leads us even when it involves pain and humiliation and people thinking and saying false things about us. God will always lead us to avoid all forms of evil, but we may not always be able to avoid the appearance of evil. There are times in each of our lives when we're falsely accused or when people jump to erroneous conclusions about us based on inaccurate information or partial truths. In those instances our call is to follow God and be at peace no matter what people say about us. Let's let God change our plans whenever he pleases even when it may lead to criticism or a different future than we had imagined.

A second application from today's passage is that God calls us to relate to people the way Joseph related to Mary when he suspected she had been unfaithful and the way Jesus related to the woman caught in adultery. Rather than responding in anger and seeking justice and punishment, God calls us to respond with humility and forgiveness and a continued desire for the good of the person accused of or caught in sin. When there really is sin, we help people take responsibility it and repent of it, but we then find a way to help them walk out of

it, leaving it behind by the power of the Spirit. And we never bring up their past again, just as God never does. We treat others the way God has treated us.

A third application is that both Joseph this week and Mary last week provide us with great examples of how to live life with God and walk with him. May we be sensitive to God's direction and guidance in our lives through prayer and study of his Word and respond to what he tells us with the simple trusting obedience exemplified by Joseph and Mary.

And as we close today, let's not ignore or miss the most important truth for the world today: people need to be saved from their sins and there's only One who can do it: Jesus Christ. Do you believe that today? Let's be sharing the hope we have in him with others at every opportunity. Let's ask God to give us boldness and clarity to do it well. The good news about Jesus Christ is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. Let's not be ashamed of it or fearful of any rejection we may experience as we share it with others. It's the power of God to bring new life and salvation. Let's not keep it to ourselves.