

Birth of Jesus told to Joseph
Matthew 1:18-25

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. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he 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 your wife, for that which is 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.” 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). 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. (English Standard Version – ESV)

Background:

- Betrothal, which usually lasted a year, meant that a bride and groom were officially pledged to each other, but had not yet consummated the marriage. Thus, an advance toward anyone else would be regarded as adulterous (Deuteronomy 22:23-27).

- Mary would have been probably been between 12-14 years old, and Joseph probably 18-20. Their parents likely arranged their marriage with Mary and Joseph’s consent. Premarital privacy between betrothed couples was permitted in Judea but apparently frowned upon in Galilee, so Mary and Joseph may not have had any time alone together at this point.

- The penalty for adultery under Old Testament law was death by stoning, and was applied to infidelity during betrothal as well (Deuteronomy 22:23-24). In New Testament times, Joseph would have merely been required to divorce Mary and expose her to shame; the death penalty was rarely, if ever, executed for this offense. Betrothals were so binding that if a woman’s fiancé died, she was considered to be a widow. A woman with a child, divorced for infidelity, would be hard pressed to find another husband, leaving her without support if her parents died.

- The name Jesus (Aramaic: *Yeeshuwa*, Greek: *Iesus*) means “God is salvation” in Hebrew. Parents often intended the names they gave children to have some meaning, but if God gave the name, it had special significance. The Old Testament taught that God’s people would be saved in the time of the Messiah (Jeremiah 23:5-6), and Jewish readers in the first century would have understood this salvation to mean more than just personal forgiveness. They prayed for the day when God would deliver them from the consequences of their sins from subjugation beneath their enemies. Many believed that this deliverance would occur when their people as a whole reformed and turned wholeheartedly to God. Jesus came to deliver his people from personal sin and, thus, to deliver them from its judgment as well.

- Matthew cites Isaiah 7:14 and indicates broad familiarity with Isaiah’s context. In that context, Assyria would lay waste Israel and Aram before “a son” was grown (Isaiah 7:14-17); therefore, “a son” seems to refer to Isaiah’s own son (8:3-4).

- Joseph acts like Old Testament men and women of God who obeyed God's call even when it went against all human common sense. Marriage was a covenant, starting with the betrothal, followed by a ceremony and consummation, which ratified the marriage, normally on the first night of the 7-day long wedding. Joseph marries Mary, but does not consummate the marriage until after Jesus is born. Jewish teachers thought men should marry young, because they could not resist temptation (many blamed a woman's uncovered hair for inducing lust). For Joseph to exercise self-control until after the birth of Jesus is a strong role model for sexual purity.

Questions:

- + Why is the virgin birth of Jesus an essential doctrine of the Christian faith?
Is the virgin birth an essential doctrine of your faith? Why or why not?
- + What does Joseph's unwillingness to put Mary to shame say about his character?
How would you respond or react to news that your fiancé/fiancée was unfaithful?
- + The angel of the Lord came to Mary visibly (Luke 1:26-38), but in a dream to Joseph.
Do you believe God speaks through dreams? What proof would you need to be sure?
- + The name, Jesus, means "God is salvation" and Immanuel means "God with us."
Of these names, which one is more precious and meaningful to you, and why?
- + If God is with us as Immanuel, what does God expect of you to be with him?