



SESSION 2

JOSEPH'S OBEDIENCE

▶ **The Point**

Following God's plan will require change in your life, but it's worth it.

▶ **The Passage**

Matthew 1:18-25

▶ **The Bible Meets Life**

We always enjoyed having our kids' friends come to our home to play. Well, *almost* always. Once, two new boys came to play and they were incorrigible! The boys never listened to anything my wife or I said. And when it was time to take them home, they refused to get out of the car. They had their own idea of what they wanted to do, and no adult was going to change their plans. Even as adults, we don't like having our plans changed. After all, they are *our* plans. Yet, no matter how we plan, things don't always go the way we want. Sometimes unforeseen circumstances intervene—and sometimes God does.

Joseph surely had plans, and those plans included Mary and a family. But God stepped in with a change of plans—and what a change of plans it was! Scripture does not record Joseph's words, but we do see his response: he acted in obedience. Through Joseph's life we see that change isn't easy, but God's changes are always worth any adjustments. The changes God makes are always for our highest good.

▶ **The Setting**

Matthew was a disciple of Jesus who wrote to explain the gospel to non-Christian Jews. He focused upon those aspects of Jesus' ministry that would speak to his own people. In typical Jewish fashion, Matthew began his Gospel with a genealogy that spanned the distance from Abraham to Jesus. (See Matt. 1:1-16.) Matthew then located the birth of Christ in the context of a Jewish family and began to tell the story of Jesus' parents, beginning with Jesus' father.

What does the Bible say?

Engaged (v. 18)—A process that resembled engagement except it was legally binding and required divorce to break. No sexual relations were permitted during this phase of the relationship.

Secretly (v. 19)—A reference to private divorce performed only in the presence of two witnesses.

Matthew 1:18-25

¹⁸ The birth of Jesus Christ came about this way: After his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, it was discovered before they came together that she was pregnant from the Holy Spirit.

¹⁹ So her husband Joseph, being a righteous man, and not wanting to disgrace her publicly, decided to divorce her secretly.

²⁰ But after he had considered these things, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because what has been conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

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

²³ See, the virgin will become pregnant

and give birth to a son,

and they will name him Immanuel,

which is translated “God is with us.”

²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did as the Lord’s angel had commanded him. He married her

²⁵ but did not have sexual relations with her until she gave birth to a son. And he named him Jesus.

Matthew 1:18-19 Commentary

[Verse 18] Of **Jesus Christ** is placed first in the Greek text, making it emphatic. After a genealogy emphasizing person after person, Matthew emphasized Jesus' birth as the point of the genealogy. It occurred differently from all the others previously mentioned. It took place when His parents were **engaged**. This process lasted about a year. It was far more binding than engagement today, for the couple had to divorce to break the contract. During betrothal, the man already was known as the husband (see Matt. 1:19), though the couple would not yet have sexual relations until after a public ceremony.

Jesus' parents appear without fanfare or background information. Joseph and Mary's plans for their future were disrupted by an unusual set of events. **Before they came together** certainly refers to sexual relations. They had not consummated the marriage but were still merely engaged. Even so, Mary was pregnant, typically a source of shame for both the man and the woman. For Joseph, who knew the baby was not his, it would cause deep soul-searching. Matthew clearly indicated this child was **from the Holy Spirit**. What was happening was not a result of immorality but of God's supernatural power. Luke recorded that the angel told Mary the Holy Spirit would come upon her and His power would overshadow her. (See Luke 1:35.) God overshadowed Mary with His power and she mothered a child while still a virgin. The virgin birth was the genius plan of God, but at this point Joseph could not see it. He struggled with the fact his wife was pregnant and the child was not his.

[Verse 19] Matthew described Joseph as **a righteous man**. He abided by God's law and had moral character. Joseph and Mary were young, Jewish people, well versed in the law of God, with a desire to please God. News of Mary's pregnancy sent Joseph into a dilemma. What should he do? Joseph had options. Old Testament law set the penalty for sexual relations before marriage as stoning. (See Deut. 22:13-21.) But by New Testament times, the most common way of dealing with this uncommon problem was to issue a certificate of divorce. (See 24:1.) This would often involve a public trial. However, Joseph did not want to disgrace her publicly. He was a righteous man who also had great compassion—an important combination.

Instead of divorcing Mary publicly, Joseph determined he could **divorce her secretly**. An alternative to death and public disgrace allowed for private divorce with two witnesses. This would allow Joseph to divorce Mary without being vindictive in trying to ruin her life. Joseph, a man of great compassion, decided to take this course of action. The decision showed remarkable restraint for a young man. The minimum age for marriage in Israel was twelve for women and thirteen for men. Joseph determined to divorce Mary in a way that would avoid the most embarrassment for her and provide an opportunity for both to move on in life. Mary's pregnancy was not his plan for life, but the disruption it caused was God's plan. Thankfully Joseph did not act quickly or impulsively. He remained open to hearing from God and committed to obedience.



STUDY THE BIBLE

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Matthew 1:20-23

20 *But after he had considered these things, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because what has been conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.*

21 *She will give birth to a son, and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”* **22** *Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet:* **23** *See, the virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they will name him Immanuel, which is translated “God is with us.”*

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud Matthew 1:20-23 on page 24 of the PSG.

GUIDE: Use the Commentary on the next page of this Leader Guide to help group members understand the significance of Jesus’ earthly and heavenly lineage.

DISCUSS: Question #3 on page 26 of the PSG: **“What do the names given for the Messiah in these verses reveal about His purpose?”**

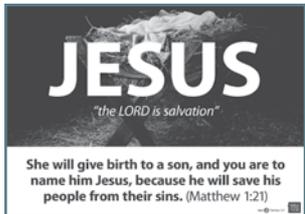
LEADER PACK: Display **Pack Item 2**, the “Matthew 1:21” poster. Using the information from the commentary, highlight the meaning of the name Jesus, “the LORD is salvation” or “the LORD saves.”

RECAP: As Joseph listened to the description of the Messiah as the one who would “save his people from their sins,” he surely realized this event was not some spur-of-the-moment decision on God’s part.

He surely knew and likely recalled the prophecy we studied in our last session—the very prophecy Matthew now quoted from Isaiah 7:14. The last words of Matthew 1:23 stand out: “God is with us.” While “Jesus” is the earthly name given to Christ (see Luke 1:31), Immanuel is a more apt description. Immanuel actually describes what God did in sending Jesus. God’s presence was intimately with His people.

TRANSITION: The next verses show us how we should align with God’s plan.

ALTERNATE QUESTION:
Why is the virgin birth so important to God’s plan to redeem the world?



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Matthew 1:20-23 Commentary

[Verse 20] Joseph's plan to divorce Mary privately (see Matt. 1:19) may have looked best to him, but God's plan was best for Joseph; a plan delivered in a dream by an angel. Dreams were not God's normal way of delivering direction and guidance, but it occasionally happened in the New Testament. God directed His people in dreams throughout the infancy narratives. The wise men were warned not to return to Herod. (See 2:12.) Joseph was warned to take his child to Egypt (see v. 13), to return to Israel after Herod died (see vv. 19-20), and to go to Galilee instead of Judea. (See v. 22.) Pilate's wife was warned that her husband should have nothing to do with Jesus' trial. (See 27:19.) Here the angel addressed Joseph as the **son of David**, emphasizing that this special child would be in the lineage of King David. The angel instructed Joseph not to be afraid to marry Mary. He couldn't worry about what people would say or do about his marrying a woman with a child who was not his. The angel emphasized the child was not conceived from man but **from the Holy Spirit**.

[Verse 21] Not only did the angel encourage Joseph to wed Mary, but he encouraged Joseph to take the child as his own son. Long before sonograms, God revealed the child's gender in the womb. The angel instructed Joseph to name Him *Jesus*. Naming a child was something the father (see Gen. 4:26) or the mother might do. (See v. 25.) That the angel assigned this task to Joseph indicated Joseph was to raise Him as his own. He would become legally Joseph's child and legally the son of David. Why name Him *Jesus*? This was not a unique name in Jesus' day. It was the same name as *Joshua* and *Jeshua* in the Old Testament. It means "the Lord saves." This meaning was reflected in the pronouncement of this special child's role: He would **save his people from their sins**. Though Israel expected a political Messiah, the idea of salvation from sins was also present in the Old Testament. (See Isa. 53:5-6; Jer. 31:31-34). Joseph was beginning to understand that this disruption in his plans was all part of God's plan to save humanity from their sins.

[Verses 22-23] Matthew recognized the message of the dream as fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy. He quoted Isaiah 7:14, who spoke of a **virgin**, which in Hebrew merely could have referred to a young woman of marriageable age. But Matthew made clear by using the Greek word that had to mean a virgin since Mary had never had relations with a man. (See Luke 1:34.) Even after Joseph took her into his home, he did not have sexual relations with her before the child's birth. (See Matt. 1:25.) Jesus would have another name that brought hope and comfort to Israel—**Immanuel**, which Matthew translated as **God is with us**. (See last week's study for further details.) Matthew noted the fulfillment of that prophecy, a remarkable claim about the child inside Mary's womb, in the birth of Jesus. Not only was He the promised Messiah, but He was also God. He was God with His people. Joseph's head must have been spinning at this point.

Matthew 1:24-25 Commentary

[Verse 24] When Joseph awoke from the dream, he aligned himself with God's plan. He did as the angel had commanded him. Joseph's obedience to do what God asked of him was an extension of his righteous character. (See Matt. 1:19.) He was committed to obeying God before he was placed in the situation to believe some difficult things and take some difficult actions. Living in the righteousness of Christ today will give us the opportunity to hear from Him about tomorrow. After the dream, Joseph married Mary as **commanded** by the angel in verse 20. The obedience of Joseph is remarkable. He did not question God or ask for another night's sleep to consider it. He immediately aligned himself with God's plan. Since Joseph was already betrothed to Mary, this passage indicates he took the next steps to finalize the marriage. After the betrothal period of about one year, the husband would complete a formal marriage ceremony, take his wife into his own household, and consummate the marriage through sexual relations. Joseph did all of these except the latter.

[Verse 25] The angel never said Joseph could not have sexual relations with Mary after their marriage, but Joseph refrained anyway. In doing so there was no question in their minds that this child was a gift of God. Joseph's actions kept the focus on Jesus not on the new couple. The fact Joseph took God's command seriously, marrying his pregnant fiancée, and beyond that allowing her to remain a virgin until the birth of the child, indicates Joseph was a man committed to aligning himself with God's plan. Joseph's obedience continued. He would move his family to Egypt because God warned him to move. (See 2:13.) He would settle in Nazareth because of the command of God. (See vv. 19-23.) His actions fulfilled prophecies about Jesus and ensured He would be safe from Archelaus. (See v. 22.) Later steps of obedience often depend upon obedient steps in the beginning.

Joseph also obeyed the Lord by taking Jesus as his own child. Matthew summarized, **he named him Jesus**. Naming a child took place eight days after birth at the time of circumcision. The name had been given to both Joseph (see 1:21) and Mary. (See Luke 1:31.) They were in harmony because they both heard from God concerning the name and purpose of the child. He would "save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). He would be the Messiah promised by God from days of old. God interrupted Joseph's plans. Joseph did what he always does in Matthew's Gospel—he obeyed. He aligned himself with God's plans and embraced God's disruption in his life in order to experience the abundance of God. In doing so, he got to hold the Son of God in his hands. He got to mold the early years of Jesus' life. Sometimes change and disruption is a part of God's plan, and if it is, it is not a bad thing!

Read the article "Carpentry in the Biblical World" in the Winter 2018–2019 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Previous *Biblical Illustrator* articles "Messianic Expectations in the First Century" (Winter 2012-2013), "Divorce in the First Century" (Fall 2007), "Joseph the Carpenter" (Fall 2007), and "Joseph: Mary's Husband" (Fall 1994) relate to this lesson and can be purchased, along with other articles for this quarter, at lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator. Look for Bundles: Bible Studies for Life.

