

## From Guilt to Forgiveness

### Matthew 1:18-25

December 13, 2020  
Steve DeWitt

We are continuing our Christmas series entitled *To You, from Above*. Christmas and gifts go together. And rightly they should, as Jesus was and is God's gift to us. Last week we looked at this from the perspective of the Gospel of Luke regarding the angels and the shepherds. The angels emphasized that Jesus was born *to us* and *to all the people*, even the bottom-of-the-social-ladder shepherds. Why tell shepherds first? Why not the socially important, well-placed, educated, wealthy, or influential? By announcing it to the shepherds, all these centuries later we can be confident that Jesus was God's gift to us, too. Few of us can relate to the King Herods, or the Nicodemuses, or the Pilates of our day. But all of us can spiritually relate to the shepherds. Christmas urges us to consider if Jesus came even for the shepherds, he must have also come for someone like me.

We turn now to the other Gospel birth narrative, Matthew, and ask, if Jesus is God's Christmas gift to us, what do we receive when we open this gift?

Compared to Luke, Matthew's account is much different and much shorter. There's no mention of Gabriel appearing to Mary at Nazareth. No birth of John the Baptist. No Caesar Augustus and global politics. No angels. No sheep. No shepherds. No manger scene at all. If all we had was Matthew, kids' Christmas pageants would look much, much different. Here is how Matthew tells it:

*"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" (Matthew 1:18-25 ESV).*

Luke tells this story more from Mary's perspective. It's possible Luke talked to Mary herself when writing his Gospel, hence details only a mother would recall.

Matthew's Gospel is written to the Jews and he is making the argument for Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy regarding the Messiah. He begins the chapter with the genealogy of Jesus, which runs from Abraham to Joseph and finished the birth narrative with Joseph naming Jesus. We will get into what that means in a moment.

Our focus is verse 18, but let's process this story. *"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" (Matthew 1:18).*

There is a lot of first-century Jewish culture baked into this story that is critical to understanding it. He introduces Mary, a small-town girl betrothed to a small-town guy

named Joseph. Jewish betrothal was very different from how we practice engagements. Don't project a ring and wedding planning onto this story. Jewish betrothal was much closer to actual marriage than our engagements. There was a ceremony involved in getting betrothed. Promises were made. Dowries were paid. A dowry was money or property that came from the family with marrying the daughter. Right now, how many dads of daughters are glad we don't practice dowries anymore? How many of you husbands neglected to ask about a dowry from your future father-in-law? Perhaps bring it up this Christmas when you're having dinner with your in-laws. Let me know how that goes.

What is important is that while Mary and Joseph were betrothed, sexual intimacy during this period was strictly forbidden and very strongly punished. The law allowed for the punishment of stoning, even though by the first century that was rarely enforced. It was a shaming and humiliation in a small town where everybody knew everybody's business. In fact, it was called adultery to be sexually involved during betrothal. Betrothal was basically marriage except living together and sleeping together.

It is during this waiting for final marriage status that Mary is showing a baby bump. The emphasis is on, *"before they came together."* Joseph knows as only the man can that he isn't the daddy. That doesn't prove a virgin conception, but it does show Joseph's reasonable perspective on the baby bump.

The Old Testament Law gave Joseph the out and he could have divorced Mary and he would not have been wrong to do so, given the growing evidence. But Matthew notes Joseph's character—he clearly loved Mary. *"Being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame."* For him, this marriage was more than social arrangement. We sense that Joseph loved her and didn't want to shame her. So, he was making plans 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'"* (Matthew 1:20). I wonder if Joseph wanted to interrupt and ask, *who is the Holy Spirit?* The person and role of the Holy Spirit based solely on the Old Testament Scriptures is rather vague. The doctrine of the Trinity, God's threeness in oneness wouldn't be properly understood for some time even after Jesus.

We don't know how Joseph came to adequately understand, but clearly he did. God created this child in Mary. This is God's doing. And of course, we know and celebrate that salvation belongs to our God. It is his doing, not ours. The rest of what he said is the focus of the rest of our message, *"She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins"* (Matthew 1:21).

Until ultrasounds, Joseph is one of the few dads to know in advance the gender of his child. He will be a *son*. I mentioned this last week, my understanding of the practice of the first-century Jews at a birth was to gather friends and family. If they announced it was a boy, they would break out in song and dancing and celebration. Why? This might be the Messiah! If it was a girl, they would all go home. For the record, as a dad of daughters, I think they got that all wrong. But such was the Messianic expectation of the day. The angel said, this baby would be a boy.

*"And you shall call his name Jesus"* (Matthew 1:21). In the Jewish culture, to name a child was even more significant than it is today. This was the right of the father and it highlighted the generational connection of this baby with the forefathers—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Often the name would be a family name. I don't think George Foreman is Jewish, but he gives the sense of it by naming all five of his sons George.

You might remember in Luke 1 when John the Baptist was born, his mother Elizabeth said, *"He shall be called John"* (Luke 1:60). The angel had told Zechariah this was to be his name. The relatives were perplexed, *John? We don't have family members named John!* This was a break with custom. Zechariah settled it by writing on a tablet, *"His name is John"* (Luke 1:63).

Down through the Old Testament narrative, names and their meaning hold great significance to their place and purpose in the redemptive story. Half of Matthew 1 is names—42 generations. Why did God change Abram to Abraham, father of many nations? Why did Jesus change Simon's name to Peter? Peter means Rock and that describes part of Peter's calling. What will this miraculous son's name be?

*"And you shall call his name Jesus"* (Matthew 1:21). Jesus. This most famous person in the world and most famous name in the world, is actually the Latin version of the Greek, *Iēsous*. But the angel didn't speak Greek to Joseph because Joseph didn't know Greek. The angel would have spoken Hebrew. The name he literally told Joseph wasn't Jesus or *Iēsous*. It would have been *Yeshua*.

Ever think about what language we will speak in heaven? How does that work? Will the angels translate for us? What language do angels speak? Probably whatever one they want, but here we know he spoke Hebrew, *you shall call his name Yeshua*.

Was there already a Yeshua in Joseph's family? We don't know. One modern researcher determined Jesus was the sixth most common name in Israel at that time.<sup>1</sup> We do know the angel wasn't trying to fit the expectation of a family name but wanting to communicate to Joseph and everyone else forever who Jesus is and his mission on earth. How so?

It has to do with what Yeshua means. The longer version of Yeshua is Yehoshua. We say *Joshua*. This means, "Yahweh saves." Yahweh is God's self-revealed name. The I Am. Yeshua is shortened and emphasizes the verb.<sup>2</sup> Saves. When you turn the verb into a noun, it is *Savior*. Joseph was not only told what he shall name this child, but the angel goes on to explain why this shall be his name.

### **Jesus' Name Explains His Mission**

*"For he shall save his people from their sins"* (Matthew 1:21). What I want us to see is that God names his gift to us, and in doing so, he gives us a hint of what and who is hidden in the wrappings of this little baby.

Have your kids ever tried to pry out of you what is wrapped under the tree? *Please, Daddy, can you give me a clue? Just a hint? Just a little glimpse into what it might possibly be? Please Daddy?*

God the Father, without our begging, gives us a very clear clue as to the nature of this precious gift. His name? Jesus. His mission? *To save his people from their sins*. His name explains his mission. Also...

---

<sup>1</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander E. Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2015), 50.

<sup>2</sup> William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1973), p. 108.

## God's Gift Displays Our Need

I'm sure we've all had the experience of receiving a gift that either we didn't really want, or we already have. It's a future white elephant gift. You know the look we feign on our face: *Oh, thank you. How kind of you.*

Have you ever been offended by a gift? What does the wife think when the husband gives her a present and it's a subscription to Weight Watchers? Does that go over well? Or a wife who buys her husband a book entitled, *How to be a Better Husband*? The gift is saying something about the need.

In a much more serious way, what should we humans think God is telling us when the gift to us from above is a Savior who will save his people from their sins? By the very nature of the gift, we see from God's perspective, our greatest need.

*"There is a sense in which this statement is not only Christological in nature (in what it says about Mary's child) but also anthropological, for it says that the Gospel's readers, both past and present, are the kind of people who need a Savior!"<sup>3</sup>* What a wonderful point. God's gift indicates our greatest need. Our greatest need is forgiveness of our sins. Our greatest need is to be reconciled with a holy God. Our greatest need in a world of death is eternal life. So, what does God do? He sent a sin Savior. He gave us Yeshua.

*If God had sent a doctor, we'd know our bodies were sick.  
If God had sent a politician, we'd know our government was broken.  
If God had sent a plumber, we'd know our pipes were leaking.  
If God had sent a soldier, we'd know we were going to war.  
If God had sent an architect, we'd know we would need to build.  
But God sent a Savior.*

*If God had sent an electrician, we'd know our wires were crossed.  
If God had sent a midwife, we'd know we were pregnant.  
If God had sent a pastor, we'd know we needed a sermon.  
If God had sent a teacher, we'd know we need some learning.  
But God sent a Savior.*

*If God had sent a mailman, we'd know we had mail coming.  
If God had sent a pilot, we'd know we were going on a trip.  
If God had sent a chef, we'd know we were in for a feast.  
If God sent a farmer, we'd know we needed food.  
But God sent a Savior.*

*If God hadn't sent a Savior, we'd think Christmas was about trees and toys.  
If God hadn't sent a Savior, we'd assume we and God were good.  
If God hadn't sent a Savior, we'd think our sins were no big deal.  
If God hadn't sent a Savior, we'd not be saved from our sins.  
But praise God, God sent a Savior!<sup>4</sup>*

The one God sent shows us what we need the most. Sinners need a Savior. God's gift perfectly corresponds to our greatest need.

---

<sup>3</sup> Robert Stein, *Luke: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture* (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 1993), 108.

<sup>4</sup> Steve DeWitt

There is one easily missed part of the angel's words that may mean the difference between eternal heaven or hell for you. *For he will save all people from their sins*. Is that what it says? No. "*He will save his people from their sins*" (Matthew 1:21, emphasis added). Even here before Jesus was born we see the division that his life and ministry would create forever. *His people*. Jesus will later call this group his sheep. The apostles will call this group the elect, the church, the redeemed. The angel foretells a salvation that is particular. Or to say, Jesus is a Savior only to those who believe in him as the Savior from their sins.

This is where Christmas gets offensive to the modern man. Our culture likes sentimental Christmas and holiday Christmas and gift giving and receiving Christmas. Retail money-making Christmas. Days off from work and school Christmas. Salvation Army bell ringing and TV Christmas special Christmas. But the modern person rejects an exclusive Christmas and an exclusive salvation. This is certainly not politically correct. But when you are an angel of the Most High God, you don't care what humans think. You just say it the way it is.

So, the lingering question from the words of the angel is not what Jesus' name means or why he came, but are you included in "his people"? To receive the blessing of this gift from God requires a sinner to repent of his sins and turn to God by faith in Jesus as the Savior who died for our sins and who was resurrected for our eternal life. Then we become "his people" and then Jesus becomes God's personal gift to us.

If you are a Christian, rejoice that when the angel said, *he will save his people from their sins*, 2,000+ years ago, an angel of God was talking about you.

Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. ESV® Permanent Text Edition® (2016)*. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

© 2020 by Steve DeWitt. You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that: (1) you credit the author, (2) any modifications are clearly marked, (3) you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, (4) you include Bethel's website address ([www.bethelweb.org](http://www.bethelweb.org)) on the copied resource.