

## *“The Beautiful Dissonance of Christmas”*

Matthew 1:18-25

December 3, 2017

As we come to this familiar Christmas passage, let me mention right up front that Matthew has two main purposes in recording these events for us.

1. *To show that the events surrounding the birth of Jesus are a fulfillment of OT prophecy, thus validating Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah.* Remember from last week, this is the purpose of Matthew’s gospel, to show convincing proof that Jesus is the Messiah. One of the ways Matthew will do this in the first 3 chapters is by using 5 OT quotes to connect the early events of Jesus’ life to the what had been foretold by the prophets regarding the Messiah. Therefore, vs. 23 is key as Matthew makes the connection between Jesus and the prophecy of Isa 7.
2. *To clarify the mission that the Christ has come for: to “save His people from their sins (21).”* This is important because most of the Jews were expecting a military or political Messiah that would free them from Roman rule. They certainly were not expecting a carpenter’s son from Nazareth to be the one they were waiting for, so Matthew needs to show biblical support that Jesus fits the bill and clarify just what His mission would be.

For our purposes this morning, let me highlight three aspects of our passage: *a miraculous birth, a man of worth, and a Messiah as God Himself who saves.*

### **Miraculous Birth**

Verse 18 matter-of-factly describes the miraculous conception of Jesus in the womb of a virgin. **[vs. 18]**

The first thing that we learn is that Mary and Joseph were betrothed. In other words, they were engaged. However, a betrothal is different from a modern-day engagement in one important way. It was legally binding. A betrothed couple were legally husband and wife, though they had not yet had the marriage ceremony and could not have a physical relationship until the ceremony. The betrothal period was anywhere from 9-18 months long and it was meant as a proving time to demonstrate that the bride was chaste and not carrying a child.

Verse 18 is very clear that this miraculous conception in the womb of Mary took place before there was any intercourse between Mary and Joseph. This means that Joseph was not the biological father of Jesus, but rather His legal father, much like the father of an adopted son.

Now we can understand why vs. 16 back in the genealogy was so unusual. The preceding 41 generations all started the same way with someone being the father of someone else. But vs. 16 reads that “Jacob was the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, by whom Jesus was born.” Here Joseph is named only as a son and a husband, but not as a father.

Mary’s pregnancy has nothing to do with Joseph or any other man. Her pregnancy is the result of a miraculous intervention whereby the Holy Spirit created within her a human seed, a human life, mysteriously intermingled with the life of the second member of the Trinity so that the child born to her would be both God and man. In God’s providence, not only was Jesus placed in the line of David through Mary’s side of the family (see Luke 3), but also interjected into the line of David through Joseph as the legal, earthly “father” of Jesus. Thus, it could be said that “Jesus was the blood descendant of David through Mary and the legal descendant of David through Joseph.”<sup>1</sup>

What is the significance of this virgin birth? Why is this a doctrine that must not be compromised? The virgin birth means that Jesus is not only a descendant of David, He is also the Son of God, one born without the taint of a sin nature, to live a righteous life that could not only represent us as

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<sup>1</sup> John MacArthur, *The MacArthur NT Commentary: Matthew 1-7*, pg. 3.

true human being, but also be a pleasing sacrifice for sin as a perfect and holy man. Take note that vs. 18 (see also Luke 1:34-35) is so clear that to disbelieve in the virgin birth of Jesus is to reject the Bible itself.

## Man of Worth

While the virgin birth is loaded with theological significance, Matthew also presents Joseph to us as a man of worth—a man who models for us a godly life in midst of difficult circumstances.

Take a moment to put yourself in Joseph's shoes. We must assume that Joseph's initial shock to the news that his fiancé, Mary, is pregnant, must have been horrifying.

- He knows that the child is not his—it can't possibly be.
- He also knows that there is only one way, humanly speaking, for a woman to become pregnant. Who is the father of this child?
- Rather than getting reasonable answers from Mary, she says that she was told by an angel that the Holy Spirit had brought about a miraculous conception in her.
- To end a betrothal would require a legal divorce.
- This is in a time when divorce is not only shamed, but according to OT law a person could technically be stoned to death for adultery (Deut 22:23-24).

What is Joseph to do with all this? It doesn't seem to fit Mary's character to be promiscuous or to tell unbelievable stories. And yet he can't possibly reconcile all of this in his own mind.

Joseph is severely caught up in what I am going to call the dissonance of life.

**Dissonance** ~ two notes that clash because they are too close together. [Example]

**The funny thing about dissonance is that if it is in the right context and if it is resolved, it can make beautiful music.** [Example]

As a teenager I developed a love for **Jazz**. The reason I like Jazz is because it is *true to life*. It doesn't just stick to nice standard chords and rhythms. It uses dissonance and syncopation (it doesn't just stay on the down beat.).

**Life is also filled with dissonance and syncopation although we don't use those terms. In life, dissonance is referred to as *pain, conflict, disappointment*. In life, syncopation is called the *unexpected* which throws us off beat.**

**Joseph was experiencing the dissonance and syncopation of life.** In vs. 19, all he could hear was the clashing sounds and unexpected rhythms of life's pain.

So how will Joseph respond to this confusing dissonance in his life? Take note that vs. 19 specifies that Joseph was a righteous man. As a righteous man he sought to follow God's law and do what was right in the eyes of the Lord. He is a man of integrity and when the pressure is on he will do the right thing. But what is the right thing? Assuming that Mary is carrying another man's child, it would be adultery according to the law for him to marry her. Yet he doesn't want to go out of his way to disgrace her either. It seems that the best thing to do for her long-term well being as well as his own reputation would be to just send her away secretly—a quiet divorce.

As a righteous man, Joseph is trying to do the right thing, yet we also see that he is a gracious man. He is seeking to uphold the law while at the same time extend grace to the one he believes has wronged him. This is why I call Joseph a man of worth—He proves to be a man of grace and truth under severe pressure. Joseph is trying to resolve the dissonance but true resolution will not come until God intervenes in **[vs. 20]**.

Notice the first thing the angel does, is address Joseph as the son of David. But wait! We know from verse 16 that Joseph is the son of Jacob. So what's going on here? Is the angel just having a bad day with names? No, he's reminding Joseph that he belongs to the royal lineage of David. Joseph may feel as though he is a very obscure and insignificant man—and now a troubled man. But it's as if the angel is saying to him, "Joseph, you are in a strategic position by God's hand for this hour!"

Second, the angel tells Joseph to not be afraid. What might Joseph be afraid of? Possibly Joseph was afraid of public shame, humiliation, rejection, or even financial hardship. Yet it's even more likely that because Joseph is a righteous man, that he is fearful of breaking God's law and incurring God's discipline in a way that would cost him God's favor.

But the angel says, “do not be afraid to take Mary as Your wife, for the child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit”—Joseph, this is God’s doing! You are feeling the discomfort of life’s dissonance, but God is weaving it into beautiful music. God is working out His great and glorious plan of redemption.

Finally, the angel gives Joseph a final word of instruction: “*she will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins (21).*” In this simple statement, the Messiah’s mission is clearly established. The purpose of Jesus’ life is far more significant than military or political freedom. Jesus had come to reverse the curse of sin and rescue His people eternally.

Now, take note of [vs. 24-25]. It’s easy to gloss over these verses as mere matter-of-fact. But ponder with me some life application from Joseph’s example. First, Joseph responds with immediate obedience. He doesn’t hesitate. He woke up and did what he was told, taking Mary as his wife. And as soon as the Baby was born, he named him Jesus. Was Joseph’s obedience easy? Probably not. Just because Joseph now knew what God was doing, didn’t mean that other people would understand or believe.

Let me suggest two life principles at this juncture:

- 1) **Being used as an instrument in God’s hand will often cause us to experience dissonance in this world.**
- 2) **Obedience often requires us to put a higher value on pleasing God than preserving our own reputation.** (fear of God over fear of man)

One of the reasons I admire Joseph so much, is that when He knew what God asked of Him, no other voice weighed in. He was willing for his life to be misunderstood and even judged by other people. He was willing to live with dissonance and leave the resolution up to God in his timing. His life was not his own. He was a servant of the Most High God. Righteous. Gracious. Obedient. Selfless. A man who believed God’s word and acted on it.

In addition, He as a man of self-control and honor. According to vs. 25, even though he took Mary in as his wife, he kept her a virgin until after Jesus had been born.

## Messiah as God Himself who Saves

Yet, more important than what we see in Joseph’s life, is what we see of Jesus—Messiah, as God Himself who saves.

[vs. 22-23] The reason these events took place and the reason or which Matthew records them, is to demonstrate the fulfillment of what had been foretold by Isaiah in Isaiah 7:14. Matthew’s point is to verify that Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of the son spoken of in Isaiah who was identified as Immanuel—God Himself among us.

Let me summarize for you the background to this prophecy in Isaiah 7.

In Isaiah 7:1, the Israelites and the Arameans have formed an alliance to defend themselves against the Assyrians.

The Assyrians have become a major world power and they are in the process of swallowing up nations around them. Not only are they an extremely powerful army, but they have been known as one of the most cruel people to have walked the face of the earth.

Because of this, the Israelites and the Arameans have formed an alliance to defend themselves against the Assyrians and they pressured Judah to join them as well. However, king Ahaz in Judah decides that it would be safer to form an alliance with the Assyrians than to join the Israelites and Arameans.

The Israelites and Arameans are furious and so they decide to attack Judah before they can join ranks with the Assyrians. **When king Ahaz** and his people heard that the Arameans were approaching, they were terrified. [vs. 2]

So the Lord sends Isaiah to console King Ahaz and in vs. 4 he says, [vs. 4]. In other words, “Don’t be afraid of these guys. They may be furious but they are powerless because I will not allow them to prevail. And then He gives Ahaz a warning in vs. 9: “*If you will not believe, you surely shall not last.*” (NIV: “*If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.*”)

Don’t miss what God is saying: “Ahaz, if you trust in Me you will stand, but if don’t trust Me you will fall, not by the Arameans and Israelites, but by your lack of trust in Me.” Ahaz needs to make a choice: will he trust in God and be delivered or will he trust in someone else and be defeated?

God knows that Ahaz is not a believing man, he's a godless man, so he gives him an incredible opportunity. [vs. 10-11] God is giving Ahaz the opportunity to have as much evidence as he needs to believe.

But Ahaz responds in vs. 12 by saying, "I will not ask nor will I test the Lord." That sounds pretty pious at first. After all, **Deut 6:16** says "*Do not test the Lord your God*" (NIV). But what does that mean? It means don't test the Lord with your disobedience. So if God tells him to ask for a sign and Ahaz refuses to ask for a sign, He is actually testing the Lord with his disobedience. (he's testing the Lord by saying that he won't test the Lord.) Ahaz doesn't want a sign because he doesn't want to believe.

And so Isaiah responds in vs. 13 by saying, "*is it too slight a thing for you to [test] the patience of men, that you will [test] the patience of my God as well? Therefore Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel.*"

[Vs 16]: In other words, before this child is old enough to discern right from wrong, the Arameans and Israelites will be defeated and no longer a threat."

Now we know from the NT that the prophecy of this child in Isaiah 7:14 is ultimately fulfilled in the virgin birth of Christ. But that's too far in the future to be a sign for Ahaz about his situation. There must be another more immediate fulfillment along with the ultimate fulfillment in Christ. Well, in chapter 8, Isaiah marries a young prophetess who was a virgin at the time the prophecy was given. Out of that marriage came a child who they named Maher-shalal-hash-baz (vs. 3), who is also referred to as Immanuel in vs. 8.

So what ever happened to unbelieving Ahaz? The very nation of Assyria who he trusted in instead of God came in like a tornado destroying everything in its path and taking Judah captive (8:7-8). Isaiah 8 goes on to describe the horrible conditions and despair Judah would endure for a time, but in chapter 9 turns his attention again to a child who would be born—a light to dispel the darkness (9:2), but this Immanuel would be more than more than a mere sign, He would be God Himself among us [9:6-7].

Matthew points us to the ultimate fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy in Christ. Jesus is the true virgin-born Son who has come to be Immanuel, God with us, to save us from our sins.

It may be insightful to consider the interplay between these two names and their meanings. As you know, Immanuel means "God with us." Jesus means "Savior" or "Yahweh saves." Here's what we need to see: The only way for Jesus to save us from our sins was for Him to come in the flesh as Immanuel, God with us. He had to enter into our distressing situation in order to rescue us from it.

### **Illus: Joyce Klein**

I had to enter into her distressing circumstances (with her) to help rescue her from them—I couldn't rescue her from the road. And, I had to have an ability that compensated for her disability.

So Jesus entered into our sinful world to rescue us from it. He became like us by taking on human form, yet He came without sin in order to rescue us from sin. He came with a righteousness that compensated for our unrighteousness.

For 33 years Jesus walked the face of this earth and was tempted by sin, yet never bowed to its pressure. His perfect righteousness qualified Him to be the sinless sacrifice we needed to be reconciled to God.

This is why the virgin birth is so essential. In His death He was like us (a true human) in order to truly stand in our place and bear the judgment of God for our sin. Yet in His death He was different from us (without sin) so that His sacrifice would be truly pleasing to God.

My friends, Jesus came to resolve the ultimate dissonance of life, the dissonance caused by sin which creates a clash between you and God. And the only way for the dissonance of your sin to be resolved, the only way for your life to be beautiful music before God is for you to forsake your sin and surrender to Jesus as Savior and King of your life. He can turn your dissonance into beauty, but you must let Him be both the composer and conductor of your life. You must let Him not only write the score of your life but also direct it.

Are you experiencing the dissonance of life? Whether you are experiencing the dissonance of sin or the dissonance of circumstances, God is able to resolve it, but you have a choice to make. If you fail to believe and trust in God, you will be crushed by the weight of your sin and circumstances. Or you can respond with faith and obedience like Joseph and discover that Jesus is with you to save you.

#### **Open Communion:**

- Bread: *You shall call him Immanuel, God with us.*

**Isaiah 59:2** ~ "...your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, And your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He does not hear."

**I Peter 3:18** ~ "Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God..."

--Jesus Himself became our peace and destroyed the enmity between God and man (Eph 2:13-18).

- Cup: *You shall call Him Jesus for He will save His people from their sins.*