

December 13

Lesson 2 (KJV)

CALLED TO BE EMMANUEL

DEVOTIONAL READING: Isaiah 42:1–9

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Matthew 1:18–25

MATTHEW 1:18–25

18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost.

19 Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily.

20 But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.

21 And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.

22 Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying,

23 Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.

24 Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife:

25 And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name JESUS.

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KEY VERSES

Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins. — Matthew 1:20b–21

CALL IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Unit 1: The Beginning of a Call

LESSONS 1–4

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. List the choices Joseph faced in his dilemma.
2. Explain the meaning and significance of the name Emmanuel.
3. Write a prayer of thanksgiving for the gift of Jesus.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

A. Not What Some People Would Think

B. Lesson Context

I. Facing the News (Matthew 1:18–19)

A. Unexpected Pregnancy (v. 18)

B. Private Planning (v. 19)

II. Seeing the Big Picture (Matthew 1:20–23)

A. Through Dreams (vv. 20–21)

B. Through Scripture (vv. 22–23)

Following “God with Us”

III. Accepting the Call (Matthew 1:24–25)

A. A Marriage (v. 24)

I Could Never Do That!

B. A Birth (v. 25)

Conclusion

A. “Yes, You”

B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

Ahaz - Ay- haz.

Assyria - Uh- sear- ee uh.

Assyrians - Uh- sear- ee unz.

Babylonians - Bab-ih- low -nee-unz.

Emmanuel - E- man- you-el.

Galilee - Gal- uh-lee.

Herod - Hair- ud.

Isaiah - Eye- zay- uh.

Josephus - Jo- see -fus.

Judean - Joo- dee -un.

Nazareth - Naz- uh-reth

Sepphoris - Sef- uh-ris.

Tiglathpileser - Tig- lath-pih- lee- zer.

Introduction

A. Not What Some People Would Think

Several years ago, the president of a small chain of savings and loans received a polite but firm letter from an account holder. The letter stated his desire to withdraw all funds immediately. A quick review of accounts revealed that this would be a significant loss: the investor in question had more than \$5 million in assets. Alarmed, the president called the disgruntled man to see what was wrong.

The customer was an older gentleman who had retired as a multimillionaire by age 60, but very few people were aware of his true net worth. This was partly because the man continued to take care of his own farm, drove an older pick-up truck, and preferred boots and work overalls as clothing.

On a recent occasion, he had gone into a branch of the bank in another town to cash a check. Not knowing him and seeing his rough appearance and dirty hands, the tellers had treated him with disregard. He left feeling that he did not like the way that bank's employees treated "average working people," hence the reason for the letter's stated intent to close out his accounts.

"I guess," he said as he hung up the phone, "I'm just not what some people would think."

It's easy to conclude that someone who dresses or talks a certain way, works at a certain kind of job, or drives a certain type of vehicle must necessarily be a certain kind of person. Judging the Joseph of

today's text based on appearance might have led his contemporaries to conclude that he had no special place in God's plans. How could he be the type of person who would be called to raise the promised Messiah?

B. Lesson Context

Today's lesson focuses on the unlikely hero Joseph of Nazareth. Joseph's background was unremarkable in a number of ways. First, his place of residence, Nazareth (Luke 2:4 ; 4:16 , 22), was a tiny village well off the beaten path. In Joseph's day the town was so insignificant that it is not mentioned in contemporary sources outside the Bible. Even the first-century Jewish historian Josephus didn't include Nazareth in his list of Galilean villages subdued by the Romans during the great Jewish revolt of AD 66–72. The majority of the inhabitants of Nazareth would have worked as subsistence farmers or day laborers, living the peasant lifestyle typical of Rome's occupied provinces (compare John 1:46).

Second, even within Nazareth, Joseph's social standing would have been nothing special. In Matthew 13:55 , its residents were dismissive of the adult Jesus, calling Him "the carpenter's son"—a reference that reveals Joseph's trade. The Greek word often translated "carpenter" could refer to a skilled woodworker, boutique craftsman, or construction worker.

In the first century AD, Galilean laborers like Joseph were employed on major construction projects funded by the Roman client-king Herod Antipas, where they worked with stone, wood, and other materials to build roads and public buildings. Joseph may have spent most of his life working on the new and elegant Roman colony at Sepphoris, a three-mile walk north from Nazareth.

Life was hard for poor laborers in that era, a fact that may explain why Joseph apparently did not live to see Jesus' ministry. While he is mentioned as the father of the adult Jesus in John 6:42 , he last appears in the Gospels in Luke 2:41–50 , a story that took place when Jesus was 12 years old.

In ancient times, tradespeople like Joseph were not protected by labor laws or collective-bargaining contracts. As a result, they were subject to long workdays, dangerous conditions, and the typically high levels of taxation that Rome levied on its subjects. It is highly unlikely that Joseph had received any kind of formal education, and almost certain that he could not read or write with any level of proficiency. Were it not for his association with Jesus, Joseph would have been lost to the pages of history.

But despite his humble origins, Joseph stood out among his peers in at least two respects. First, Joseph was a descendant of King David (see Matthew 1:1–16 ; lesson 1), and thus a member of Israel's royal line. This fact explains why Joseph took his pregnant wife from Galilee to Bethlehem (a Judean village about six miles from Jerusalem) to register for the Roman tax census (Matthew 2:1 ; Luke 2:1–4). Bethlehem was David's hometown (1 Samuel 16:1). David was widely understood to be the ancestor of the coming Messiah, who would rule Israel on David's restored throne (2 Samuel 7 ; Jeremiah 23:5–6).

The second way Joseph stood out among his peers is part of today's lesson.

I. Facing the News

(MATTHEW 1:18–19)

A. Unexpected Pregnancy (v. 18)

18 . Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost.

This verse summarizes a great deal of information that is discussed in detail in Luke 1:26–38 . Following the Jewish custom of that day, Joseph was probably considerably older than his bride-to-be, perhaps in his mid to late 20s while she was in her mid to late teens. Before their wedding, Mary was told by the angel Gabriel that she would soon bear a child—a human impossibility in view of the fact that she was still a virgin (Luke 1:34).

Matthew 1:18 picks up Mary’s story after her return to Nazareth from a three-month visit with Elisabeth (Luke 1:39–40 , 56). One can only imagine how Joseph felt upon discovering that his fiancée was with child. Any explanation from her that this was the result not of unfaithfulness but of the power of the Holy Ghost must have been mind-boggling, to say the least.

What Do You Think?

How can you help your church do a better job of extending grace to those experiencing out-of-wedlock pregnancies?

Digging Deeper

What guardrails would need to be put in place to prevent the appearance of condoning premarital sex?

B. Private Planning (v. 19)

19 . Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily.

Mary and Joseph her husband were not yet married, in the sense that they were not living together in the same household. But ancient Jewish custom considered betrothed couples to be legally bound to one another once their engagement had been announced and the dowry paid.

Joseph’s presumed anger over the situation could have inclined him to demand the justice that the Law of Moses clearly prescribes. Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22 both state that those convicted of adultery are to be executed (see also John 8:5). At the very least, Joseph could have publicly terminated the engagement and kept the dowry. That also would have brought disgrace to Mary and her family. Such a move would have been completely justified, given what Joseph knew at this point.

What Do You Think?

Under what circumstances, if any, would you support the public shaming of someone? Why?

Digging Deeper

What passages in addition to Matthew 18:15–17 ; 1 Corinthians 4:14 ; 6:5 ; and 15:34 inform your answer?

Yet in this case, compassion won the day. Realizing that the child was not his, Joseph decided to call off the engagement quietly. His attitude was reflected in the description of Joseph as a just man. His faithfulness to the law was appropriately matched by his desire to be merciful.

What Do You Think?

How can you help your church do a better job of ministering to those who are divorced or are going through a divorce?

Digging Deeper

What difference, if any, should the distinction between a scriptural and an unscriptural divorce play in the ministry effort (Matthew 5:31–32 ; 1 Corinthians 7:10–15)?

Though many men would have qualified to be Jesus' adoptive father based on being part of David's lineage, Joseph's faith was of utmost importance for raising the Son of God. Joseph was clearly a man of remarkable faith and compassion. These traits come to the forefront of today's passage and are critical to Matthew's larger account of the circumstances of Jesus' birth and early childhood.

II. Seeing the Big Picture

(M ATTHEW 1:20–23)

A. Through Dreams (vv. 20–21)

20a . But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream.

Matthew's account of the events leading to Jesus' birth is filled with dreams. No fewer than five times, characters received divine revelation through dreams that significantly impacted the course of events. One of these dreams was given to the wise men to warn them not to return to the treacherous King Herod (Matthew 2:12), advice that may have saved the wise men from imprisonment or death at the tyrant's hands. The other four dreams were all communications to Joseph, calculated to empower him to protect Mary and Jesus from harm (2:13 , 19–20 , 22).

While anyone would be awed by even one such experience, Joseph in particular must have been surprised by these revelatory dreams. In the Old Testament, very few people learned about God's plans in dreams; they include Abraham (Genesis 15:12–16), Jacob (28:10–15), Joseph (37:5–9), Solomon (1 Kings 3:5), and Daniel (Daniel 7:1–27). Undoubtedly, there had been nothing in Joseph's life to this point to suggest that he would be numbered with this select group.

20b . Saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.

What Joseph shared with most others who experienced revelatory dreams in the Bible was faithfulness to God. And what he learned from his first dream was more significant than anything God had ever revealed to anyone before. Mary's pregnancy was supernatural in origin, not the result of sin. Joseph

was called to partner with God in caring for both her and her baby in order for God's eternal purposes to be fulfilled.

The phrase of the Holy Ghost parallels the angel Gabriel's announcement to Mary in Luke 1:35 . Luke underscores the implication of the virgin birth by noting that Jesus, having no biological father, would be "Son of the Highest" (Luke 1:32). This title has less to do with the manner of His conception and more to do with Christ's rights and authorities as the sole heir of everything that belongs to His divine Father (see John 1:14–18).

What Do You Think?

What procedure should Christians use to determine the Lord's will when faced with a decision having lifelong impact?

Digging Deeper

Which Bible texts help you most in this regard?

21 . And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name J ESUS : for he shall save his people from their sins.

Ancient names were often symbolic, associating a person with an event or identifying an important attribute (examples: Genesis 17:5 , 15–16 ; John 1:42). Following a similar pattern, Jesus is the Greek version of the common Hebrew name Joshua, which means "God saves."

Joseph perhaps thought of the biblical hero Joshua, whom God used to lead Israel into the promised land. Joseph's adopted son, Jesus, would not save ... his people from political oppression (as many Jews in that time expected of the Messiah), but instead would save them from their sins . In His death, Jesus saved the world from sin by becoming the ultimate sacrifice (Romans 5:8–11). But in order for Jesus to save people later, Joseph needed to protect Jesus right then by caring for Mary.

B. Through Scripture (vv. 22–23)

22 . Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying.

Matthew pauses the story to remind his readers of a second way in which the significance of Christ's birth and mission was revealed to the world: the ancient and public testimony of the Hebrew Scriptures. The prophet in view here is Isaiah (see Matthew 1:23 below).

Matthew quotes or makes reference to prophetic texts several other times in his account of Jesus' birth (Matthew 1:23 ; 2:6 , 15 , 18 , 23). These citations, combined with Jesus' genealogy (1:1–17 ; see lesson 1), work together to demonstrate that the circumstances of the Messiah's birth, although not what most Jews anticipated, were nevertheless consistent with what God had promised. Put another way, while many Jews and pagan religious experts like the wise men (2:1–2) would have expected the king of the Jews to be born in a royal palace, Matthew shows from Scripture that Jesus' humble origins are actually proofs of His messianic identity.

23 . Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.

This prophecy from Isaiah 7:14 was delivered during a particularly dark period in Israel's history. Isaiah lived in the eighth century BC, about 200 years after the split between the northern and southern tribes following the death of Solomon (1 Kings 11:41–12:24). Sometime in the 740s BC, the northern kingdom, Israel, allied with Syria and invaded the southern kingdom, Judah (2 Kings 16:5). During the ensuing siege of Jerusalem, Isaiah met with the Judean King Ahaz to encourage him, promising that God would overthrow his enemies. Isaiah even invited him to ask for a divine sign that victory would come (Isaiah 7:1–11).

Feigning piety, King Ahaz refused, saying that he did not want to test God (Isaiah 7:12). In fact, he had already decided to seek protection from an earthly ally: he had sent ambassadors to negotiate with the Assyria's King Tiglathpileser, padding the offer with a large quantity of gold and silver taken from the Jerusalem temple. Assyria responded by attacking and subjugating Israel. As a gesture of thanks, the king of Judah built an altar in the temple, patterned after one he had seen in the Assyrian capital, Damascus (2 Kings 16:10–18).

While these actions seemed politically expedient at the time, Isaiah recognized the faithlessness of this strategy. He responded by offering the king of Judah a sign quite different from one the wicked king might have requested: as evidence that God himself would deliver Judah from its enemies, a child named "Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14) was to be born. Before a certain child reached age 12 or 13 (Isaiah 10:16), the nations of which the king was so terrified would cease to exist. After the Assyrian defeated those nations, they would "get theirs" at the hands of the Babylonians, who destroyed tiny Judah in 586 BC.

It's unclear whether Isaiah himself saw this prophecy about "Immanuel" partially fulfilled through the birth of his own son the following year (Isaiah 8:1–10). Matthew definitely saw the fullest significance of Isaiah's words in the birth of Jesus. But in the long term, this sign referred to the coming of the Christ, the ultimate "Emmanuel... "God with us" (Matthew 1:23). The Bible emphasizes the importance of God being "with" his people (examples: Genesis 26:3 ; 31:3 ; Exodus 3:12 ; Isaiah 43:2 ; John 14:3 ; Revelation 3:20). This is more than a figure of speech. In Jesus it has become a fact: "the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14).

Isaiah's more detailed promises in Isaiah 9 were also fulfilled—see Matthew 4:12–16 . Through Jesus' ministry, God would indeed be with His people in an unprecedented way.

FOLLOWING 'GOD WITH U S'

"You're bringing a baby here?!" The aid worker's eyes were wide with disbelief. We were about to land in an African refugee camp in a politically and militarily volatile region. Malaria, typhoid, and yellow fever were active in the area. Far away from any urban amenities, we would start by building a mud hut to live in. What in the world were we thinking, going there with a child?

We were trying to follow Jesus' example. He was Emmanuel, God with us. The Word became flesh. He talked face-to-face with people from all kinds of backgrounds, and He loved them.

Our son took his first steps in that camp. He played with children while we visited with their parents. We lived our lives side by side with the refugees, whose language had never been written down and most of whom did not know Christ. How can you follow the one who is "God with us" in your circumstances?

III. Accepting the Call

(M ATTHEW 1:24–25)

A. A Marriage (v. 24)

24 . Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife.

Any doubts Joseph may have had were settled by his remarkable dream. Consistent with his faithful character, he did not question what God showed him or hesitate to act (contrast Luke 1:18). Instead, he immediately proceeded with the marriage. It's not difficult to imagine that Joseph moved the date of the wedding to ensure that Mary would be cared for during her pregnancy.

I COULD NEVER DO THAT!

As a college student, I was painfully shy. I dreaded walking between classes, not knowing how to interact with people I passed. I sat alone in the cafeteria. On Sunday morning, I would leave the service the moment it ended. Sometimes I'd even start trembling if a lot of people were around.

Yet, I felt called to ministry. I talked to my professors about my dilemma. I continued studying. While pursuing a graduate degree, I heard about Bible translation. That sounded like a perfect mission for an introvert!

With every hesitant step I took, God went before me. An internship led to a career. I experienced community, met my future wife, and worked side by side with national translators as they brought God's Word into their own languages.

Alone I could never have the ministry God wanted for me. Listen to His call, step out in faith, and prepare to be amazed at what He will do.

What Do You Think?

How does Joseph's obedience serve as an example and challenge to you?

Digging Deeper

How do texts such as Exodus 4:13 and Isaiah 6:8 influence your answer?

B. A Birth (v. 25)

25 . And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name JESUS .

Joseph not only obeyed God's instruction to take Mary as his wife, but also went a step further by not consummating the marriage until Jesus had been born. God had not told him to do this, and the Law of Moses did not forbid sex during pregnancy. So Joseph's choice of abstinence most likely reflected his own sense of the gravity of the situation. This point is stressed to ensure that there can be no confusion about Jesus' paternity: Mary had not been sexually active at any point before or during her miraculous pregnancy.

Following the birth of Jesus, the couple clearly had a normal married life. This is evident from the fact that Jesus had at least four brothers and three sisters (see Matthew 13:55–56 ; Mark 6:3). Two of His half brothers eventually became leaders in the church. They wrote the two epistles in our New Testament that bear their names: James and Jude.

Conclusion

A. 'Yes, You'

Matthew's account of Jesus' birth is a classic "Yes, you" story. Throughout the Bible, we see people who were surprised when God called them to do something, and who responded to the call with a "Who, me?" Consider Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 17:17 ; 18:12), Moses (Exodus 4:13), Isaiah (Isaiah 6:5), Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:6), and Peter (Luke 5:1–10). All these people went on to play key roles in the story of salvation. But first they had to get over the "Who, me?" barrier.

Joseph and Mary lived out the classic "Who me?/Yes, you" storyline in a unique way. Neither was particularly outstanding as the world judges such things. But when called, they did what they were asked.

How tragic when God has a task but finds no one to respond (example: Ezekiel 22:30)! When we say "Who, me?" God typically responds, "Yes, you."

B. Prayer

Father, help us remember what it means that Jesus was born "God with us." Let Your presence give us the confidence to be obedient whenever You call. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Faithful people trust God, especially in extraordinary situations.