

A Call to Protect **Matt. 1:18-25**

Intro. The story of Christmas revolves around the sudden and dramatic intervention of God after 400 years of silence. When the time was right, the salvation God planned before creation shifted from being “on hold” to “full forward.” The God of heaven set in motion some new things that involved unlikely people in unusual circumstances. The silence was broken by several announcements made by the angel Gabriel. Our December messages have focused on these angelic appearances and what God asked of Zechariah / Mary / and now Joseph. God’s word to Zechariah involved A Call to Prepare. God’s word to Mary involved A Call to Provide. This morning we’ll see how God’s word to Joseph involved A Call to Protect.

I can’t begin to imagine the level of responsibility entrusted to secret service agents assigned to protect the US president and other dignitaries. Here’s a short paragraph that describes their mission. *“The Secret Service is recognized for the physical protection it provides to the nation’s highest elected leaders, visiting foreign dignitaries, facilities and major events. In order to ensure a secure environment for protectees, the Secret Service integrates a variety of innovative technologies and maintains a highly skilled and motivated workforce. Using advanced countermeasures, the Secret Service executes security operations that deter, minimize and decisively respond to identified threats and vulnerabilities.”*

This morning I want us to focus on Joseph’s role in the nativity. Joseph was asked to play a role as protector to Mary and the Christ Child. The virgin and the baby in her womb were essential to God’s plan. Yet both were vulnerable and surrounded by visible and invisible hostilities. And Joseph wasn’t a soldier or some kind of super hero. He was an ordinary young carpenter from the small village of Nazareth. But the role entrusted to him was critical. His responsibility was straightforward. He was called to listen to God and to obey the instructions he was given. Let’s consider the context...

The genealogy of **Matt. 1:1-17** establishes the credentials and birthright of King Jesus. Yet the final entry in the genealogy is different from all the others! **vs. 2-15** say, *“So and so was the father of so and so and so and so was the father of so and so....”* But that formula ends abruptly at **v.16** which says... **“and Jacob, the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ.”** As a man wired for precision, Matthew identified Joseph as Mary’s husband. But unlike the other entries, he didn’t say Joseph was the father of Jesus. He said Jesus was born of Mary. In Greek, the pronoun **of whom** is feminine. This begs an explanation. How could a man be born of his mother only? The following verses explain this unusual exception in terms of the virgin birth or what is technically called, parthenogenesis. While Mary was the birth-mother of Jesus, Joseph was not His birth-father. The narrative which follows in **vs.18-25** is much more than a quaint story to be read at Christmastime. These words were written to establish the miracle of Christ’s birth. The virgin birth explains how Jesus is **Immanuel**, which means **God with us**. If the genealogy establishes the humanity of Jesus, the virgin birth establishes and explains His deity.

1. Matthew’s Testimony - v. 18 - This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit has an extraordinary ability to state the profound with elementary school simplicity. **Gen. 1:1 - In the beginning God created the Heavens and the earth.** The verse says God made it all, period! End of discussion...now let’s move on. That same simplicity is found here. **v.18** says, **This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.**

Speaking by the Holy Spirit, Matthew wrote, **"This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about...** Scholars and skeptics can speculate / theorize / argue / and debate till the cows come home. But through a credible witness, God said, *"This is how it happened... This is how Jesus came to live among us... His mother Mary was engaged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together in physical union, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit."* The "birds and the bees talk" could not explain her pregnancy. It defied any natural explanation! Yet how Jesus was conceived was just the first miracle in a long list of supernatural events associated with His coming! And listen...to be a follower of Jesus is to learn to expect the unexpected! Am I right about that? The Christian life is full of surprises. A common phrase heard among believers is... *"but God."* *"My ship was sinking, but God."* *"My neighbor had no interest in the Gospel, but God."* *"My marriage was on the rocks, but God."* *"I had this lifelong habit, but God."* *"The bill came due and I had no way to pay it...but God."* (and as Paul Shoop would say, "etc. etc.")

2. Joseph's Dilemma - vs. 19 - Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

Joseph faced a heart-wrenching dilemma. Scholars say he was probably the age of a senior in high school...just 17 or 18 years old. His marriage had been arranged by his parents and Mary's parents. The dowry had been paid and the marriage covenant was sealed. According to Jewish customs, he and Mary were legally married even though they hadn't enjoyed a ceremony or lived together. Their marriage could only be annulled by a bill of divorcement. In Israel, the betrothal or waiting period lasted a year. During that year, the bride and groom prepared for intimacy and life together. The *kiddushin* was also a time set aside to test the bride's fidelity and purity. Sometimes this waiting period exposed the sort of unfortunate situation Mary's pregnancy appeared to represent.

Like every young couple about to be married, there was love, excitement and great expectations. As they waited for their wedding day, Joseph prepared their new home. Like Jewish marriage customs, Jesus is today preparing a home for His bride, the church. So Joseph was getting ready to provide for and protect this one who would be his life partner. But then something thing unexpected and completely devastating happened. He learned that Mary was pregnant. Maybe someone tipped him off or maybe he noticed that Mary's figure had changed. How he approached her remains an interesting mystery. But men take my advice...if your wife's figure changes ever so slightly, leave it alone...staple your lips shut if you must...any comment you may make has danger written all over it!

But by this time, Mary was "showing." This unwanted discovery hurt Joseph deeply because he knew he wasn't the father. When Gabriel appeared to tell Mary she was about to become pregnant, she said, **"How will this be...since I am a virgin?" - Lk. 1:34** Mary knew it would take a miracle because she was a virgin. But in Joseph's mind, the only conceivable explanation was that his bride had been unfaithful. The young woman he loved, was not who he thought she was. While raw emotion could have clouded his judgment, Joseph's life was ruled by higher principles. He's called **a righteous man**. Faith in the God of Israel had made him a man of integrity and conscience. His character was morally upright and his life was guided by God's law. Mary was blessed to have this carpenter as her husband!

But in the midst of his pain, Joseph faced a moral dilemma. What should he do? According to the Law, Mary was guilty of adultery and could be stoned to death at the door of her father's house. **(Dt. 22:21.)** The law also allowed private divorce before two witnesses. We see this in **Num. 5:11-31. v.19** says Joseph was planning to divorce Mary, but unwilling to divorce her in a way that would subject her to open disgrace. To proceed with the marriage would appear like an admission of guilt. Divorcing Mary would clear him of immorality, but it would bring lasting shame on the girl he loved. What should he do? He was torn between the obligations of the law and the options of grace.

He decided to divorce Mary as quietly as possible. Yet here's the thing...even before the angel appeared to him in a dream, he was more concerned about protecting Mary than preserving his own reputation. The Lord knew Joseph was this kind of man...a man of honor...a man He could trust for this secret service.

Friends listen...this isn't a novel...it isn't fiction or fantasy. This isn't a story line somebody would imagine or compose when founding a world religion or introducing a great king. Matthew simply tells us what happened. It's as real and down to earth as life itself. Not only did the family tree of Jesus include some gnarly characters, but His birth appeared to involve a scandal of immorality. Yet in choosing the ancestry of Jesus, it was as though God used a megaphone to proclaim His mercy and grace to everyone! Like a secret service agent, God found a man He could trust to do what was right...a selfless man who would obey His instructions to protect Mary and her child.

3. The Angel's Intervention - vs. 20, 21 - But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

In that era, God often spoke through dreams and visions. A revelational dream is not to be confused with the random images, thoughts and emotions that enter our minds while we're sleeping. Dreams like these are often weird and meaningless. I remember a vivid dream Peggy had some years ago. It came to her the night after our flight from San Diego to Flint had a short layover in Las Vegas. Peggy dreamed I had slot machines installed in the church narthex to raise money for our building fund! Sunday morning she woke up in a foul mood and mad at me! (I give her enough reason to be angry with me without needing any help from weird dreams!) But revelational dreams are different. When God speaks to someone through a dream, the dreamer has no doubt that God is speaking to them! Revelational dreams were always clear and clearly remembered.

Let me add this...from all reports, God is presently using dreams to reach many Muslim's for Christ. I've heard similar reports about God speaking to Jews through dreams. Dr. Jim Dennison explains that since 60-80% of the Muslim world is illiterate; God has chosen to speak into their lives verbally and directly. He writes, "*The God who spoke to patriarchs and apostles through visions is now speaking to Muslims in the same way. As the prophet Isaiah once wrote, "I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me. To a nation that did not call on my name, I said, 'Here am I, here am I.' - Isa. 65:1* This is an exciting piece of evidence that we're living in the last days. And don't you agree?...if God loves Muslims and wants to reach them and save them, we must too!

Now it's a mystery why God spoke to Zechariah and Mary by an angel who actually appeared to them while communicating to Joseph by dreams. But that's what He did. The Lord responded to Joseph's dilemma secretly by a dream. The angel told him not to be afraid to take Mary home to be his wife. He angel explained the child conceived in Mary's body was **from the Holy Spirit**. This explains why the genealogy in **v.16** doesn't call Joseph the father of Jesus. Mary's pregnancy didn't happen the normal way...her pregnancy was **from the Holy Spirit** or caused by God Himself.

In **Lk. 1:35**, the angel Gabriel had already explained this to Mary. But Mary seems to have said nothing about it to Joseph. The angel told her the child would be a **son** and they were to give him the name, **Jesus**. The names given to Hebrew children often had special significance. **Jesus** means *Jehovah the Savior* or *Jehovah saves*. His name declares who He is and why He came. He is God the Savior because just as the angel said, "**He will save His people from their sins**".

Since God is the party offended by our sin, salvation and forgiveness is something only He could graciously provide! Jesus came to seek and save all who are lost in sin...and that's everybody. Now mark this down because it's also explains why Jesus was rejected and crucified. The name **Jesus** refutes the idea that His mission was political or symbolic. Jesus didn't come to provide an example of servanthood / self-sacrifice / or some humanitarian concern. He didn't come to make our lives more comfortable and pleasant. He came to rescue us from the tyranny of sin and death! He came to deliver us from a world destined to perish. Any other gospel is misleading and untrue.

But human beings weren't the only ones to oppose and attempt to derail God's redemption plan. The forces of evil stood in fierce opposition to Christ and tried on numerous occasions to corrupt His family tree. Then after Jesus was born, Herod sought to destroy Him. **Rev. 12:4, 5** say, **The dragon (or Satan) stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, (Mary) so that he might devour her child the moment it was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne.** Joseph found himself in the middle of a cosmic struggle of epic proportion! And hostility against Jesus is still widespread today. It's no secret the world is trying to remove Christ from Christmas. Jesus said the tide against Him is to be expected and will increase in the last days. In **Jn. 15:22, 23** He put his finger on the reason so many reject Him. **If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin. Now, however, they have no excuse for their sin.** Like an alcoholic in denial or the rationalizations of a felon...none of us likes to admit we have a sin problem. Many find it too disturbing to believe that God was here among us. Because who knows?...if God was here, He may show up again and hold us accountable.

In the OT, God said He would be the One to save His people from sin. Remember how the Lord delivered Israel from their enemies without their assistance? The Israeli people were spectators to the plagues God sent. They watched bodies of water open for them to cross but close on their enemies. They saw massive city walls fall flat and invading armies turn on each other. The same is true with respect to spiritual salvation. **Ps.130:8 - He Himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.** And **Isa. 45:17 - But Israel will be saved by the LORD with an everlasting salvation; you will never be put to shame or disgraced, to ages everlasting.** So, this child named, **Jehovah saves**, would be God in human form. His credentials prove He is the One...the Messiah sent by God. His mission was one that only God could accomplish! He came to rescue us from sin and release us from the fear of death. **Heb. 2:14, 15 - Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death--that is, the devil--and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.** And this amazing plan to save us hinged on the safety of Mary and her baby. While only God could protect her, He shared this responsibility with young apprentice carpenter. Though the world knew nothing of what was happening behind the scenes, God chose, called and equipped Joseph for this unprecedented assignment.

4. The Lord's Promise - vs. 22, 23 - All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"--which means, "God with us."

Unique to Matthew's Gospel is about 50 quotations from the OT. Matthew clearly saw the connection between ancient events and prophecies and what he witnessed and knew to be true about Jesus. In these verses he referred to a sign God gave the prophet Isaiah more than 600 years before Jesus was born. **Isa. 7:14 - Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.** Immanuel consists of two Hebrew words: 'El' means *God*, and *Immānū*, means *with us*. **Isa. 8:10** illustrates the impact of Immanuel. It says, **Devise your strategy, but it will be thwarted; propose your plan, but it will not stand, for God is with us.** (Immanuel) I love this verse.

As though spoken to Israel's enemies it says, "*Strategize...plan your attack...arm yourselves to the teeth...take your best shot...but remember this one thing...God is on our side, not yours! God is with us!*" In the context of **Isa. 7, 8** this name assured Israel that God's purposes will come to pass no matter how fierce or strong was the opposition against them!

Here in **Matt.1:23**, **God with us** conveys the idea that God sovereignly works out His purposes in the lives of His people. More than just being among us, God is on the side of those who trust Him. He saves / protects / provides for / and works in and through us. He fulfills His promises no matter what. **Matt. 1:23** declares that Jesus is God, but it also declares that God's plan is fixed and unstoppable. Our ultimate security and provision is the Lord's presence with us / in us / and for us. Paul had the meaning of **Immanuel** in mind when He wrote, **What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? - Rom. 8:31** The Lord's plans for Joseph and Mary were fail safe because He was with them just as the angel told Mary.

5. Joseph's Obedience - vs. 24, 25 - When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

v. 24 says, **When Joseph woke up...** There's a pleasant way to wake up and we like it that way. But less desirable is a rude awakening (like when a smoke detector goes off...or a snoozing deacon is aroused because it's time to take the offering.) The Greek suggests the latter. **Joseph was** abruptly awakened! When his dream ended, you could have peeled him off the ceiling! Before breakfast, he probably raced to Elizabeth's house to tell Mary the news. He's out of breath and beside himself with excitement. Like a guy who just heard some fantastic news, he blurts out the story. He fully expects his young wife to erupt in jubilation. But Mary calmly says, "*I know Joseph...the angel told me.*"

But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus. Breaking with all that was customary in that culture, Joseph took Mary to his home and postponed any sexual activity. Do you know what Joseph was doing? He was protecting God's interest. He took Mary and God's Son into protective custody. Reading between the lines, a small wedding ceremony may have taken place, but the Bible doesn't say so. There's no way Joseph could have realized how significant his obedience was. And as life comes at us, neither do we! Joseph immediately did what the Lord asked him to do. He didn't question or argue. He obeyed. And that's what we should do. Like Joseph, we never fully realize the long range impact our choices have until later when we can look back with clearer vision. Obedience is always the wisest course of action. Though God's purposes are fixed, He accomplishes extraordinary things through ordinary people who trust and obey Him.

The early chapters of Luke and Matthew provide a clear revelation that Jesus was born of God and Mary. **Matt.1:20** says Jesus was **conceived** in Mary, not simply created or placed in her body. The terminology is exactly the same as other verses where human conception is described. This kernel of truth is the wonder of Christmas. It means the Son of God shared our humanity by entering the world the same way we did. Mary played her part in the conception, birth and nurturing of the Christ child. Along with Joseph, she also protected God's interest. She carried her baby, then nursed and cared for Him after He was born. Consequently, Jesus really is a member of the human race. God really became a fetus in the body of a young Hebrew woman. As Max Lucado has written, Mary didn't know whether to call him, "Junior" or "Master."

Now this is a mind bender, but it's true...*Even though Jesus became what He was not, He did not cease to be what He was.* (repeat) This isn't hard to grasp...its impossible! He who fills and sustains all things, was contained in a virgin's womb and sustained by a human mother. As Matthew testified in **v.18**, this is the divine record...**this is how the birth of Christ came about.**

But why did God become man? Anselm of Canterbury considered the question. He explained that God became man in Christ because "...only One who was both God and man could achieve our salvation." Our salvation could only be accomplished by God.

A bumper sticker on a car in front of me read... *"The solution to our problems will not come from the minds of those who created them."* That's so true and that includes salvation. Self-salvation is as ludicrous and impossible as do-it-yourself heart surgery. We were so deep in an avalanche of trouble somebody had to dig us out. The effects of sin have bound our will and corrupted our nature so completely that we couldn't please God if we wanted to. Apart from Jesus, we're like a broken tool that can't do what its maker designed it to do. If we were to be saved, it could only be by One who possesses the will and the power to do it. And that One is Jesus!

And by the way, that's why Satan wants Christ removed from Christmas. This explains why the truth about the Incarnation / the Virgin birth / and Christ's deity are under such attack. A Jesus who isn't God can't save anybody. If the baby born in Bethlehem's manger was not God in human form, we have no hope! *Wherever the incarnation is marginalized, salvation is no longer of God who stoops but of man who climbs.* And the truth is...we can't jump far enough or climb high enough to reach God!

The Christmas story is laced with God speaking through angels and doing some wonderful things. His plan advanced through human participants...through people who loved Him and were faithful to Him. Like a secret service agent, Joseph was called to protect the single most important person in all of history. Listen as I read more of the story. About two years later, Magi from the east came in search of the one born king of the Jews. **Matt. 2:11-15** says, **On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."**

Then again after Herod died, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream. **Matt. 2:19-23** - **After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead." So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth.** In each situation, Joseph obeyed.

Joseph might have gone into a full scale panic if all at once he realized that God's entire redemption plan hinged on his obedience. The wonderful Gospel of salvation might have never come to pass if he failed to protect Mary and her child. But God called Joseph and gave Him grace to obey and to fulfill the mission assigned to him. And God continues to do the same today with ordinary folk like us. I don't know what mission God is secretly calling you to fulfill, but I know He has one for you. Though we can't see it all right now, it's a mission with eternal significance where lives are at stake. He asks us to follow Him and be a participant in His great salvation plan. So let Joseph be an example for us all. God accomplishes great things through those who honor and trust Him. He gives grace to those who obey His word and humbly accept the role He has for them...even when obedience is costly.