

The Story Behind the Story

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Matthew

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I don't know about you this evening but I'm very grateful by that statement, "Thank God my yesterday is gone." Let remind each and every one of us that in the book of Exodus when the Lord described himself by name, he said, "I AM THAT I AM." Let me remind each and every one of us, you may or may not have heard this before, but every time the devil reminds you of your past, you just need to remind him of his future.

Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, tonight as we turn to your word, Lord, again we are reminded particularly in this passage that the only one who is qualified to forgive, the only one who is able to save is Christ Jesus alone. God, we thank you in advance for the prophecies that are fulfilled in this passage. Thank you again, O God, for the truth that is revealed. May tonight be an opportunity not only to relish in your goodness and your grace but hopefully to even see more abundantly and more clearly your love for us through the sending of your Son. It's in his name we pray. Amen.

Tonight, let me encourage you to turn to the gospel of Matthew 1. We're actually going to be toward the end of Matthew 1 in verses 18 through 25. And if you're new to us either here in person or online, we are walking through the gospel of Matthew here on Sunday evenings at First Baptist, Opelika, and I'm going to go ahead and be honest and I have no idea how long this journey is going to take. But here's the good news, the silver lining because I know there are 66 books of the Bible and there are times where we can get so in the weeds of particular books of the Bible we forget that there are 65 other ones that bear our attention. But the gospel of Matthew is very unique for one very specific reason: it serves for us to transition us out of the Old Testament into the New. It transitions us from what we know as Judaism to Christianity, from Israel to the church, from Jew to Gentile. The book of Matthew, I believe, is the most critical book of all the Bible to study because when we can grasp Matthew we actually are learning the totality of the Bible at one time.

So I know we're walking through Matthew but if you'll forgive me in advance for the length of time it's going to take us, this really isn't a study of Matthew, though it is, it's really a study of the totality of scripture by walking through what we know as the gospel

of Matthew and tonight we come to verse 18 and one of the things that we're going to do is spend the majority of our time looking at specific names, specific terms that are used, specific ideologies or concepts that are spoken of because, again, remember we're coming out of the Old Testament. For thousands of years through the tabernacle, through the temple, through the law of Moses, he has spoken to his people and now he's going to inhabit flesh, he's going to dwell among us, as the gospel of John 1 says. So it is very important for us, it's necessary if we're going to talk about the coming of the Messiah, if we're going to talk about what you and I collectively call the Christmas story, then we need to study the terms that are being used so that we don't make his coming out of our own perspective, our own desires, but truly as the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies.

Tonight beginning in verse 18, I want to address what I call "The Story Behind the Story." Now what we know as the Christmas story that we readily read in the month of December is actually found in the gospel of Luke, however, there is an account here in the gospel of Matthew. It doesn't read quite as poetically as Luke and you'll understand why we don't read it fireside with our family, but it's important because it serves, again, as this strategic transition very clearly communicating to us not only who Jesus would be but why it is important for him to come.

Verse 18 it says,

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.

Now one of the blessed "curses" of this passage is most of us this evening both in person and online are so familiar with the story that we often don't think about the particulars of the story. And so tonight, I just want to walk through the persons that are on the scene who the Lord utilized, I want to talk about the protocols that were used, and then most importantly the processes that were involved.

So let's deal with the people. Now there's obviously some very key folks that we put in every one of our nativity sets at our home and places of work and such, let's begin with Mary. Now we know from the gospel of Luke she has this very famous declaration, we call it the Magnificat, where she declares her unworthiness to the Lord; she even speaks that her Savior is within her during that time period of what we commonly refer to as gestation. But Mary is critical to the passage obviously as the one who would physically give birth, but more than that she is the fulfillment of what we heard in this passage when it says the prophet that spoke days ago. In fact, it's in the book of Isaiah 7 where the Lord says, "I will give you a sign." You know, it's interesting about that passage is that it is in Matthew 12 where the Jewish people who won't believe in Jesus say, "Jesus, we want a sign." In Isaiah 7, the Lord says, "Hey, ask me of a sign and I'll give it." And they said, "Oh no, Lord, we're too good to ask you of a sign." He says, "Well, too bad, I'm going to give you one anyway."

And here is the sign. I'm sure many of us are familiar that in the Old Testament when God implements a sign, this is beyond even the miraculous. I mean, think about when the Israelites were in Egypt and all the plagues took place there, that even the soothsayers, the magicians and all of those people that worked dark wonders in Pharaoh's kingdom, they could emulate and imitate some of those things but nobody but God alone can implement a sign, for example, when the rainbow is over Noah's boat after the flood, when there is dew on the fleece but not on the ground, when there is a virgin that conceives and gives birth. The entire story is supernatural in nature because it revolves around a young lady that repetitively in this story says, "I have never known a man." It is surrounded by a man who claims he has never known a woman, much less this woman, and yet we know she will give birth to a child. That is the sign that God gives. It will be supernatural that humanity was not involved by what we know by natural processes.

Before we get to Joseph, let's talk about the Holy Ghost. That is what the angel of the Lord declared, correct, that she was conceived of the Holy Ghost. Now I know we hear that term Holy Ghost and it sounds a little bit archaic, at times it sounds a little bit old fashioned, those of us who are contemporary and refined, obviously we would speak of the Holy Spirit. However one thing I want to share with you is this: the term or the phrase Holy Spirit is used 77 times in your New Testament and for those English translations that desire to communicate this very particular truth, it is actually translated Holy Ghost 71 times out of the 77. Now the question begs us why would we translate it Holy Ghost versus Holy Spirit is the reason for one verse or the other. I'm glad you asked because the answer is, yes. When we speak of a ghost, now I understand it's a topic for another study in and of itself, but just by simple definition a ghost is defined as an entity that represents somebody who is no longer here in their exact likeness. That's why we have those in our secular world who "go ghost hunting" looking for people who are no longer among the living, however their representative or the image thereof would theoretically remain.

Why is that important? Because in the gospel of John, Jesus told the disciples, "Behold, I will depart from you but another will come as I am." In other words, when the Bible says that the Holy Ghost spoke, it's communicating just as if Jesus was there in their midst, just as if Jesus was present in the very room, and for those other six times that's translated

Holy Spirit, it is speaking more of just the power, the impact, or the influence of the Spirit of God whereas Holy Ghost is the presence of the Lord himself. So when it says that she conceived of the Holy Ghost, it isn't just some distant miraculous expression of power, it's as if he, himself, with the very hands that took the dirt and formed Adam, with his very hands took and placed the child in the womb.

Then we have Joseph. By the way, probably another message for another day, but I believe he's kind of the unsung hero of this story. We'll discuss more of that in just a moment but one thing I want to call your attention to that is not listed here in Matthew 1, even though she claims she has never known a man thus fulfilling the prophetic statements, and even though he claims he has never known a woman, much less her, fulfilling the prophetic statements, Luke 3:23, remember according to Colossians 4, Luke is the beloved physician and Luke as a physician the Lord inspires his holy word through him to communicate that Joseph was the supposed father. What a wonderful statement in Luke 3:23, that those around them called him or perceived or thought of him as his father but Joseph never claimed to be the one that was instrumental in that process, he always deferred and deflected to the Lord himself. In fact, it would be because of this that Jesus oftentimes, particularly in his ministry later on, would be ridiculed, made fun of and harassed by those around him because obviously if one cannot claim who their earthly father is, then humanity has a special, shall we say, non-endearing term for them, do we not? And that was what was spoken of him so many times but even in the midst therein, you see, humanity would have a natural tendency to "clean up the story," but Joseph never did. Even though it brought mockery, even though in the flesh it brought shame from those who did not understand what was happening, he never compromised the story, always claiming to be the one to care for but never the one who was a part of. And the reason I call him the hero of the story, in a moment we're going to discuss what he had, the Mosaic law right to do and he did not enact thereon, willing to bear the shame, willing to bear the ridicule, willing to spend the rest of his earthly life being made fun of, mocked and said ill things of, but yet staying true to what the Lord spoke.

Then there is the angel of the Lord. Now we could camp out here for the rest of the night and it's going to take the Holy Ghost in me to keep me from doing so because as you study this very unique character in the scripture, the angel of the Lord, he shows up in very unique fashions, he shows up in very unique manners. In fact, there are many, myself included, who draw a very distinct parallel to the angel of the Lord in the Old Testament to what we call a Christophany. Now I know that's kind of a big word, let me unpack it for just a moment. A theophany is a physical appearance of the Lord in the midst of his creation, okay? So for example, in the book of Genesis when it says that the Lord walked in the garden of Eden with humanity, that's a theophany, that he physically was among his creation. A Christophany is when we see or observe behavior of a theophany that can very close be paralleled to the person of Jesus Christ prior to his Incarnation or his birth.

Now let me pull back for just a moment. You do understand Jesus Christ has always been. In fact, there's never been a time where he has not been but for 33 and about a half years he was in the flesh dwelling among us. So a Christophany is what takes place when

in the Old Testament we see God among his creative order visibly seen and yet picturing the person of or the attributes of Christ. For example in the book of Zechariah 3, Joshua the high priest goes before the angel of the Lord and the angel of the Lord not only fights off the devil on his behalf but claims to forgive him of his sin. Now we know there's only one who can forgive sin and that is Jesus Christ alone. There are numerous examples and the reason that I use the phrase Christophany ? is it will make your head hurt to try to reconcile how can Jesus Christ who is God, how can he be in the womb of Mary and at the same time talking to Joseph?

Now let me go ahead and confess I don't understand it, I don't get it, it's a whole lot like electricity to me. Now some of you are electricians and I appreciate your skill set but for those of us who are not electricians, let me explain what that means. I don't understand electricity, I don't comprehend how it works, but I'm not scared to flip the switch. In other words, I'm not going to deny its reality just because I cannot explain the nuances therein. I cannot explain tonight the nuances of the angel of the Lord who so often in the Old Testament gives us this representative picture of Christ prior to his Incarnation and yet is a part of the story at the same time that Christ is in the womb of Mary. Yet at the same time realize that we are dealing with God who is outside of time, he is outside of space and decided to dwell among flesh for a season.

So that, my friends, are the persons that are involved in what we know as the famous Christmas story. Now don't panic, next week we're going to talk about the wise men, we're going to talk about the magi, they're going to come along on the scene in a little bit but at least for that scene that we picture in the nativity, those are the main characters. So what are the protocols that are utilized? This is critical to the story. This is where we need to understand Old Testament concepts compared to our own which will kind of give a little color commentary to the Christmas story.

It says here that they were betrothed or espoused to one another. In verse 18 the word espoused is used, later the word betrothed will be used. It's very different than in our context when we claim that somebody is engaged. We understand what engagement is. There comes a time in a man and a woman's life where hopefully under the Lord's direction they feel that he has determined for them to become as one, according to what scripture says, and to fulfill all of the things therein. But I think we've all seen either in our lives or others that when it comes to engagement, rings can be given and rings can be given back. We've even seen some people take rings and throw them off cliffs and out of rooms and whatever it may be. An engagement in our culture is vastly different than an espousal or a betrothing in biblical days.

Many of you are familiar with this, just allow me a little levity here as I describe it. In biblical days, a young man would experience his bar mitzvah. It would be the night before his 13th birthday and they're still celebrating in the Jewish culture today but not in quite the same manner. So here's a young man for all intents and purposes is 13 years of age. That evening, he would be espoused to, he would be betrothed to his future wife and that young lady would either be within the womb of a newly married couple or she may not have even been conceived yet. It was actually a legal contract between the two

families for them to be joined one day when the woman was of age in what we call marriage or matrimony.

Now why is this important? Because Mary said, "I've known not a man." Joseph said, "I've known not her." But what did it say here? "And Joseph," verse 19, "her husband." That's important to the story because at age 13 the rings had never been given, vows had never been exchanged, that young man was considered legally married to that young girl even if she had not been conceived yet. In a moment, we're going to discuss some of that which she will be accused of doing and you understand why because in the Mosaic law, in the Old Testament times, they were already married from a legal sense even if they had not had a ceremony.

What does it say in verse 19 that he has the "right to do"? "Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a publick example." If you're legally married even if you've never "been together," and you are with child that is not of the one that you're legally married to, then what are you guilty of? Adultery. You have violated a major principle and precept of the Mosaic law. Leviticus 20:10 says that if this were to be discovered in somebody's life, that, and this is important, both parties were to be stoned to death. Now why is that important? You remember the story in the gospel of John where the woman is thrown at Jesus' feet, the woman caught in adultery? Who is not there? The man, and according to the very law that those men asked Jesus to fulfill by throwing the first stone, the man who had been privy to the situation should have been brought at his feet as well. Notice it says not willing to make her a public example. He had the very right, ability and authority to have her taken to a selected piece of property and to have her very physical life removed from her because of the perceived violation of the contract of espousal or betrothal.

Now what does he say he's going to do? He "was minded," in verse 19, "to put her away privately." Now those of you who are seasoned veterans of opportunities I have to teach and preach know that this is a significant issue to me, and the reason is this, that our culture today does not necessarily walk according to but it does not adhere to some of the biblical constructs that the Old Testament gives us and this is one of them. In our world when a marriage ends, yes, there can be an annulment but an annulment legally can only be given for very specific, very specialized reasons. When a marriage dissolves whether that is because they just decided mutually to part ways because there's been some type of violation of the marriage vows, whatever it may be, there is only one word in our language and we call it divorce, however, if you go back into what we know of the Old Testament, the Lord originally gave us the construct or the language of Hebrew.

There are actually two different nuances that can be utilized and whom we know as the New Testament Pharisees, they ran with this. In fact, there's a verse found in Malachi 2:16, it's a very famous verse, it says that the Lord hates putting away. Now I know what many of us have heard and unfortunately there are many translations of scripture out there that use the term divorce, however, in its context the term "putting away" should be utilized. Let me describe the difference. According to the book of Deuteronomy, a divorce is a legal paper given specifically to a woman not only allowing her to "remarry"

but returning her dowry to her. You say, "Her dowry?" That's right. There's a reason that weddings are so expensive today, it's because back in the day what the young lady's family would do is they would provide the man a year's worth of his salary and according to the book of Deuteronomy, that year's worth of salary was to be utilized multifold. 1. He was not to work for one solid year. 2. They were to take that year to start their home and to start their family. And can all of us who have been married just testify tonight if we did not have the distractions and the demands of life, the first 365 days of marriage, we may not have the marriage counselors we have in our culture today.

But nonetheless, when one "put away" here's what they did. They did not give a bill of divorcement. They did not return the dowry. They did not allow the woman to "start over." What they did is they took, in this case, their first wife, put her in the second best bedroom and went and found somebody else of their desire which, by the way, she would have come with a dowry too. It is a beautiful moneymaking scheme, is what it is, because you can continue – new concept, please note sarcasm – to not work and live off another family's money your whole life. All you've got to do is "put away" somebody every year.

What does it say about Joseph? That he did not want to shame her publicly and notice this phrase, "put her away privately." In other words, here's what it's saying: Joseph wasn't going to go get somebody else but if he publicly made clear what Leviticus 20 would say, then she would lose her life. To put her away privately would mean that if she had in theory been with somebody she shouldn't have been to get in the condition she was, he was not allowed to continue that relationship, he would have put her "to the side," he would have still cared for her physical needs, still would have cared for her emotional needs, still would have made sure that she would not have lost her life according to Leviticus 20, and still would have been providing the necessary means to sustain life. Again, one of the heroes of the story, that that agreement that he had with her, this is why it's important, I know an angel came and, by the way, if I was Joseph I would have needed a whole legion of angels to convince me to go forward, but the very fact that he wanted to put her away privately tells me he believed her. He believed her. If he didn't believe her, he could have pulled Leviticus 20:10 on her but it says he was minded to put her away privately.

So let's fast forward here. The processes that are involved. Verse 25, "And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name JESUS." Three things that are important to this verse that kind of bring the story behind the story to a close. We have Mary, we have Joseph, we have the Holy Ghost, we have the angel of the Lord, we have this espousal, this betrothal, we have this opportunity for public example but a private putting away. Verse 25 is one of those very critical verses not just in the story but also in the totality of scripture. Notice it says, "And he knew her not until." By the way, that phrase "knew her not" or "knew her," that's the Old Testament language for what we know as marital intimacy. In fact, if you go through the book of Leviticus, it is very sordid material, it will tell us everybody who we should "not know." Does that make sense? It's communicating in that language that activity that is only reserved for a God-ordained marriage.

Notice it says "knew her not till." There is an ideology, there is a belief by some today, even today, of what we call the perpetual virginity of Mary, that she was so pure and so holy and so righteous that she "bore Jesus but never knew Joseph." Now there's a lot of different reasons that people would adhere to this belief system but the primary reason is that in its very, shall we say, far extremes the doctrine of what we know as original sin. Now I believe in original sin because I've had three children in my house and we come out sinning. I believe in it, okay? But if you go to the far extremes like some people do, original sin is so original that even the means by which every one of us arrived on planet earth was a sinful activity, even if it was in God-ordained marriage, the very act of "knowing" somebody even if it was as God said, was a sinful act. So if Mary is holy and if she is righteous, then she can never "know" a man, much less Joseph. The way the scripture reads, "And knew her not till she had brought forth a son." So the Bible makes it clear that whom we know as Mary was a vessel of God, used by God, but she, according to the gospel of Luke, claims she needed a Savior which meant that she, just like you and I, had a sin problem that only Jesus could fix.

Then it says "brought forth her firstborn son." Now I say this all the time but I mean it seriously. I was not an English major but I know what this word means. If you are the firstborn, that means there's a second born. Now for those of you that don't know, I am the only child in my biological family. Never in my almost 50 years has my mom ever referred to me as her firstborn son. I'm her only son. Now there's times she didn't want to claim me as her son but that's a whole other story. Why would you call somebody the firstborn? Because there's a second. The only reason you would use the term firstborn is because there are others. Remember as you walk through the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, there are occurrences where they will pull Jesus aside and say, "Your mother and your brethren are here." Now Jesus will say, "Who is my mother, who are my brethren but those that do the will of the Father." He wasn't denying relation to them, he was just clarifying about us being brothers and sisters in him.

And finally, his name spoken in verse 21, again in verse 25, his name shall be called Jesus. Now the name Jesus is actually a Hebrew word. The name is Yeshua, all right? Many of you, if you know anybody who is what we call a Messianic Jew or a completed Jew, that's somebody who is Jewish by birthright but is Christian by faith, if you speak to someone who claims to be a Messianic Jew, more often than not they will refer to the Savior as Yeshua because that's the Hebrew tongue, that's the original word or the original name for whom we know as Jesus.

Why is this critical? Not only, as the passage read, would he be Immanuel, God with us, but Yeshua in Hebrew is translated Joshua. Now we call him Jesus. By the way, we know that the New Testament is not written in Hebrew so when they said call his name Jesus, of course, it makes sense because that would be their form, the Greek word for Yeshua would be Jesus. Why is this important? Why is this word the final word of this story? Because Jesus means redeemer, one who saves us, one who redeems us. And you think back to the Old Testament story, think back when the Israelites were in bondage, think about when the Lord brought them out miraculously by the plagues and then they went across the Red Sea. They wandered for 40 years because they wanted to go back to

Egypt. They eventually got to the point where all those who didn't believe, they died out. Who was it that took them to the Promised Land, was it Moses? Nope. In fact, Moses hit the rock when he was told to speak to the rock and therefore was voided the opportunity to go into the Promised Land. Who was it that took them across the Jordan River? Who was it that took them into the Promised Land? Who was it that marched them around Jericho? Who was it that finally took the people of God to the place they'd longed to go? Joshua.

So when it says "you will call his name Jesus," yes, we know that name, it comes and just rolls off the tip of our tongue but we cannot separate the name from the story in the Old Testament that this child that was born, this story that is told, the picture we have of a people in bondage to Egypt, in bondage to sin finally being taken into the Promised Land, taken to "the other side," the one who did so in the Old Testament was Joshua, the name that was used to declare to us Immanuel, God with us, is Yeshua which we translate Jesus. "You will call his name Jesus for he will save his people from their sins."

So we end the first chapter of Matthew with a lineage of 42 generations and 45 different names, a story of Mary and Joseph, the Holy Ghost and the angel of the Lord. The one who will come as the firstborn of his "earthly family," but according to the book of Revelation, the firstborn also of his spiritual family. I close with this. It says that he will save his people. Later in the gospel of John 1:11 it says that Jesus came to his own, that's the Jewish people, and his own did not receive him, but to those who believe upon him, they shall be declared the sons of God. You and I tonight, humanity in general, we have a very distinct privilege, the one who fulfilled the prophecies, the one who came just as spoken is the one who can take us out of Egypt and out of sin and into the Promised Land. The very one we sing to, the very one we pray to, when we speak the name of Jesus, we're actually saying Redeemer, the only one who can take us where we desire to go because he has taken us out of a place we couldn't get out of on our own.

Let's pray with our heads bowed and our eyes closed. Tonight, as we come to this time of decision, I know it's Sunday evening, I know that typically a gathering such as this is the faithful of the faithful, but whether in person or either online, maybe just maybe you're that person this evening that's never come to that place, never come to that point where you've recognized your sin condition and asked Jesus, the Redeemer, to save you. Maybe tonight is that night. The Bible says whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. In fact, the Bible also says in 2 Corinthians 11 that the Lord marvels that we've removed ourselves from the simplicity of salvation. Essentially all you need to do is admit that you've messed up, that you've got a sin problem and only Jesus can fix it. Maybe tonight is the night where you call on the name of the Lord to be saved. We welcome, we invite you to respond. We'd love the privilege of praying with, praying for, and celebrating that with you. But maybe tonight, you're that one who's been saved for years, maybe even decades, and sometimes even the faithful forget what the Lord has done in our lives, oftentimes the further we get from our salvation, the further we get from that proverbial Egypt, the further we get from remembering what he truly saved us from and what it was really like when we went into that proverbial Promised Land. Maybe tonight is about a decision but maybe tonight is relishing the fact of what Jesus Christ has done in our lives.

Heavenly Father, as we come to this place in our service, thank you, God, thank you that we don't sit here praying and hoping for redemption to come but, God, that we actually get to reflect and remember that redemption has already taken place. God, thank you for the person of Jesus Christ, his fulfillment of prophecy, Lord, his fulfillment of all that he did and said and ultimately what he was willing to do on our behalf. God, tonight may we truly reflect on your willingness to pull us out of sin and to take us to the Promised Land. It is in his name we pray. Amen.