

THE KING ARRIVES

Matthew 1:18-25

William Sydney Porter was a short story writer who used the name O. Henry and was considered to be a master of irony. Irony is sometimes defined as “a state of affairs or an event that seems deliberately contrary to what one expects.” As we study the accounts of how God has interacted with mankind, we can see that the real master of irony is God, Himself. This irony showed up in the choice of Sarah (who was both elderly and barren) to be the mother of Isaac through whom God’s promise to Abraham that he “would be the father of many nations” would be fulfilled. We see it again in God’s choice of a small, immature shepherd boy to be king of Israel rather than the tall, handsome, and regal looking Saul who was “head and shoulders” above everyone else.

Perhaps the ultimate irony is found in the birth and life of Jesus starting with the choice of those who would be His earthly parents. Who would expect a king to be born into a poor, uninfluential family living in a remote village in an insignificant country that was under the control of a pagan empire? Who would expect a king to be born under the cloud of suspicion that the mother had been unfaithful to her betrothal vows? These are just the initial ironies that filled the life of this unlikely (in the eyes of the world) King throughout His thirty plus years on earth. These ironies culminated in His conquering death by dying and putting an end to sacrifice and offerings by giving Himself as the complete and perfect sacrifice for sin.

This is the way God works many times. We could probably argue that every miracle is unpredictable since it is contrary to what we might expect. We just don’t expect events that are “supernatural,” but that is what we see in the arrival or birth of the King more than two thousand years ago.

Supernatural Conception – 1:18

¹⁸Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. Matthew 1:18 (NASB95)

Matthew was careful to include the significant information regarding the timing of Mary’s pregnancy relative to her marriage to Joseph. Mary was betrothed to Joseph. Nowadays we have engagements. A betrothal was more of a commitment to marry than we normally consider an engagement to be. However, before the marriage took place or was consummated, Mary became pregnant or as Matthew put it, “was found with child.” We know from Luke’s account that the conception was the work of the Holy Spirit. That is confirmed also by Matthew.

We don’t know a lot about Mary and Joseph. There are many traditions relative to Mary that are advocated by the Roman Catholic Church. Some of these have no historical nor Scriptural basis. A good example is the dogma of Immaculate Conception. The Immaculate Conception means that Mary, whose conception was brought about the normal way, was conceived (by the grace of God) without original sin or its stain. Another teaching is that of the Assumption which says that at the end of her life on earth Mary was assumed, body and soul, into heaven, just as Enoch, Elijah, and perhaps others had been before her. Such ideas are strictly human in origin and have no credible basis in any Holy Scripture of which I am aware. There are also accounts from the Apocryphal Gospels that make various statements regarding both Joseph and Mary that seem to be very speculative or presumptive.

On the other hand, there are people who deny that anything miraculous happened relative to the birth of Jesus, that it is nothing more than a myth. In fact, some even deny that Jesus was a historical person. Even secular historical references make note that Jesus of Nazareth lived in

that area during that time and was killed by the Romans. Some who admit that there was a historical Jesus deny His virgin birth and also deny His deity and His power to save. That spirit is even now in the world; it is, of course, the spirit of anti-Christ.

We have to wonder how all of this information that Mary was “with child” affected Joseph. We are not told exactly when Mary told Joseph what had happened. I would imagine that it would have been much better for her to have shared the fact that an angel had visited her immediately after the visit. Knowing human nature, it probably didn’t happen that way. Luke tells us that after the angel’s visit that Mary went into Judea to visit Elisabeth and stayed with her until John was born. By this time she was probably showing signs that she was with child. By waiting until that time to tell Joseph what had happened, he found it very difficult to believe. What did Joseph do?

Promised Messiah – 1:19-23

¹⁹ And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly. ²⁰ But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. ²¹ “She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.” ²² Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³ “BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL,” which translated means, “GOD WITH US.” Matthew 1:19-23 (NASB95)

Now we can see that not only did God choose Mary because of her character, but He also choose Joseph to be the head of the household where Jesus would grow up because of his character. Notice that Matthew described Joseph as a righteous or just man. To some this may seem to be contrary to the statement we see in Roman 3:10 where Paul quoted from Old Testament passages “There is none righteous, no not one.” Yet we see many examples throughout the Scripture of various people described as “righteous” or “just” people. The apparent conflict results from not distinguishing between absolute or imputed righteousness and practical righteous or holy behavior. Imputed righteousness is a work that God does in us and practical righteous is how we are to live our lives as a result of making choices that agree with the character and commandments of God.

The following statements are comments from Lyn Mize of First Fruits Ministry: The Practical Righteousness of God is that righteousness worked out in a person’s life resulting in integrity, virtue, purity of life and rightness or correctness in feeling, thinking and acting. Putting this into our present day situation, we can say that every Christian gets to heaven because of the imputed righteousness of Christ. This same Christian will be judged at the Judgment Seat of Christ according to his success in walking before God in truth, in righteousness and in uprightness of heart. It is a grave mistake for the Christian to settle for the imputed righteousness of Christ and to fail to seek after the practical righteousness of God.

Getting back to Joseph, we can be sure he was very hurt by what he imagined had happened, yet he was a person of noble character and that characteristic along with the love he had for Mary led him to handle the matter discretely. He was determined to end the engagement, but he would do it quietly with as little embarrassment to Mary and himself as possible. However, as Joseph tried to figure out the details of how he would handle this matter in the most discrete manner he had an unusual experience of his own.

The “this” (in verse 20) that Joseph had been considering was how to handle the situation of a betrothal that had failed. Mary had been absent for more than three months because she went to help her cousin Elizabeth in the later stages of her pregnancy that resulted in the birth of John the Baptist. When she returned to Nazareth, she was obviously pregnant. Joseph had

choices to make about what he should do. Matthew recorded that Joseph decided to just call off the wedding and not make a big deal out of it. He could have made a big deal out of this and called for Mary to be stoned, or the more usual route would have been to go to court and get a divorce, but he decided to just call off the wedding. He probably feared that the option to go ahead and marry Mary would open him up to ridicule by others and he might be getting into a relationship that was not built on mutual trust.

Joseph was conducting himself in a very noble and just manner; however, he was about to do something that was not in the plan that God had. So we see God intervening. Joseph had a dream in which the angel of the Lord appeared to him and delivered the same message about the Child that Mary had heard, even to the name to be given to the Child. This was enough to convince him to follow through with the marriage.

I think there is a lesson here for us: We may go about our daily lives doing what is noble and just, and, yet, be in conflict with the will of God. From a human point of view, Joseph's intended actions were all one could be expected to do and yet God had a better way. What God wanted from Joseph was beyond the bounds of humanly motivated love but called for the kind of love that only God can inspire. It would need to be a love that was self-sacrificing. You know, that is exactly what God was doing in Christ Jesus. We see a clue to the extent of this love in the words, "He shall save His people from their sins." At the time, Joseph did not know how that was to happen, but we can look back and see that salvation was bought by the blood of Jesus as He died for you and me on the cross of Calvary.

Notice how Matthew was careful to reference the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies as he related the story of God's intervention. This particular reference can be found in Isaiah seven where God had promised king Ahaz (through the prophet Isaiah) that he did not need to be concerned about the threats of an invasion from Aram and the northern kingdom of Israel. Through Isaiah, the Lord challenged King Ahaz to ask for a significant sign from God to confirm the assurance that he had just been given regarding the pending invasion of the enemies of Judah. Ahaz refused to ask for a sign but a sign was given to him anyway.

The particular sign that God chose to give him was one with which he was likely familiar from pagan religion mythology that had been around for thousands of years. This mythology involved the birth of a god-man to a virgin. The Babylonians, Egyptians, and other cultures had such mythological stories of the pagan gods which they worshiped. Everyone familiar with those stories likely viewed these accounts as pagan myths that had no basis of truth. Here again, we see the irony of God in choosing a sign that was similar to a pagan myth that was obviously not true and using that totally unlikely and unbelievable set of circumstances to be the way God would usher in His plan of salvation for lost mankind. To top it all off, God predicted what He was going to do seven hundred years before it actually happened. Only the Creator God has the power to give reality to that which man can only imagine. As some have noted all the "god-men" of these others religions died and are gone; however, Christ rose from death and lives forever.

There is great significance (beyond the obvious) of the virgin birth. Consider the fact that mankind was enslaved to this world system whose ruler is Satan. When Adam chose to obey Satan rather than God, he lost his dominion over creation in the same way that the possessions of a slave become the property of the slave-owner. All the children of the slave become the property of the slave-owner and slaves nor their children have any rights – they are property. If Jesus had been born of the seed of Adam, then He too would have been subject to Satan. However, being born of the Holy Spirit, He was of a different origin and, additionally, if He

refused to serve Satan (that is, commit sin), then He would not be under the penalty of sin nor the dominion of Satan. Consequently, His virgin birth and sinless life are two very important principles. If Jesus was born of a virgin, then He could **not** be of the seed of Adam.

Obedience Required – 1:24-25

²⁴ And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took *Mary* as his wife, ²⁵ but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus. Matthew 1:24-25 (NASB95)

One (and perhaps the most significant) evidence of practical holiness in the life of a person is seen in obedience to God or keeping His commandments. Obedience and disobedience are choices that we make and Joseph did as God had commanded him which gave further evidence that he was righteous man.

I suspect that the angel of the Lord made a profound impression on Joseph. The angel told Joseph not to be afraid to take Mary to be his wife and when Joseph waked up he did what the angel told him. In spite of the fact that the angel told Joseph to not be afraid (verse 20), we can well imagine there many uncertainties about how his decision to proceed with the marriage would be viewed by the community in which he lived. Joseph did not try to rationalize nor argue about the instruction but was obedient. He and Mary were officially married and yet Joseph did not consummate the marriage until after the birth of Jesus.

What do we do with this familiar story or how can we apply the lessons of how we can see God working through these two relatively obscure people? While both Mary and Joseph were already people of noble character, it would seem that the major requirement for both of them was simply to be “available” and to be “obedient.”

Both Mary and Joseph were chosen for their roles to bring the Messiah to a lost world. If we have experienced this great salvation of God through trusting in Jesus, then we are also chosen to bring Jesus to the lost world around us and that also requires us to be available and obedient.