

Hope in a Messy World

Matthew 1:18-25

Michael Felkins

Grand Avenue Baptist Church

Ames, Iowa

March 5, 2023

We are going to look at the birth of Jesus this morning. When you initially read vv. 18-25, you might believe it is a sweet story, but when you dig into it, what you discover is that it is a messy real-life story that is infused with hope.

We need to hear and read messy stories like this from the Bible and especially from the life of our Savior. Jesus didn't enter a perfect world and live in a perfect family that encountered no problems. Jesus stepped into the brokenness and messiness of our lives.

The beauty of this story is that in the messiness and brokenness, God displayed His powerful glory to give hope to His people. Here is our main point: *We can find hope for the messiness and brokenness of our lives in the eternal Son of God's incarnation.* I have three points to guide us as we work through the text.

I. Hope of Salvation is grounded in the incarnation of Jesus (Matthew 1:18)

In v. 18, we learn about the birth of Jesus. When we consider His birth, we are beginning to dig into the doctrine of the incarnation. The word incarnation means "*to put on flesh*" or "*to put on meat.*" What this means is that Jesus, the eternal Son of God, became truly and fully human and yet remained truly and fully God.

Verse 18 does not explain all of the doctrine, but it is a key verse for understanding the foundation of the doctrine. The incarnation is when God entered our human world through a divine conception in the womb of a virgin girl. Let's read it again:

The birth of Jesus Christ came about this way: After his mother, Mary had been engaged to Joseph, it was discovered before they came together that she was pregnant from the Holy Spirit.

Friends, the virgin birth is a very important doctrine. Yet, Matthew does not give us an apologetic for proving the virgin birth. What Matthew does is make the connection between v. 18, v. 23, and Isaiah 7:14. Isaiah 7:14 says:

Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign: See, the virgin will conceive, have a son, and name him Immanuel.

The prophecy in Isaiah was given to King Ahaz in the late eighth century BC. Ahaz was a wicked king. He ruled when Judah needed deliverance from their enemies. God offered to give Ahaz a sign that He was going to deliver His people. Ahaz pretended to be super spiritual and refused to ask God for a sign. Yet, God gave Ahaz the sign anyway, and it was the sign of the virgin giving birth to the child who will be called *Immanuel*. The Holy Spirit helps Matthew makes the connection between Isaiah 7:14 and Jesus' birth.

We are like Ahaz, aren't we? We needed saving from our sin and eternity in hell. We needed deliverance from the enemy of death. We didn't ask for a sign or salvation, but while we were still dead in sin, God sent Jesus, who was born of a virgin, to save us.

So, the Spirit helps Matthew makes the connection, but he does not give us a lot of details. He actually does not have a lot of detail. He simply says Mary became pregnant *from the Holy Spirit*.

Matthew teaches us that this child is special and that Jesus' birth is miraculous. He sees God is fulfilling His promise to His people. He sees Scripture's fulfillment. Bottom line: *Matthew teaches us to trust in the authority of God's word even when we do not understand all the details and how everything occurred.*

Looking again at v. 18, he writes,

The birth of Jesus came about this way.

The Greek word for *birth* is the word *genesis*. By using this particular word, Matthew draws our attention to the fact that Jesus' birth is something extraordinary. *The Spirit genesis-ed Jesus.*¹

The Holy Spirit did not create the eternal Son of God. That is not what it means. What this text teaches us is that the Spirit took the eternal, pre-existent Son of God and formed Him or knit Him together in Mary's womb. Luke writes it this way in chapter 1, verse 35:

The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.

It was the *beginning* of the Incarnate Son of God. The Eternal Son of God took on human flesh in Mary's womb. His heart began to beat; veins were formed; blood began to flow; lungs were formed; bones began to grow; a brain formed with little gray cells, and the body had nerves. He grew all of the things a baby in the womb would grow, and yet this was God in the flesh.

Friends, we ought to be in awe of the incarnation of God into human flesh. Jesus became fully and truly human in order to save us.

He came to pay our debt of sin and break sin's power on the cross. To do that, Jesus had to be truly God and truly human. Jesus had to live a fully human life. He had to live a sinless life. He had to live His life by faith in God alone.

In other words, Jesus was not obedient to God in all things because He was God. He was obedient to God because He lived His life by faith in God. He lived the life of faith that we should have lived. He lived the life by faith in God that we wouldn't and couldn't live.

Then on the cross, the fact that He was fully God meant that His sacrifice was a divine sacrifice. His death on the cross meant that the Creator was dying in the place of sinners to pay for the sins of the ones He created. His *fully divine and fully human* death on the cross was the perfect substitute. His fully human nature and sinless human meant that He was qualified to die in our place. His fully divine nature meant that His sacrifice was powerful enough to pay for the sins of God's people for all time and eternity.

Friends, the incarnation means hope in our messy world! God came in Christ to reconcile sinners to Himself. The miracle of the incarnation means He can save those whom you would never believe could be saved. Just as Jesus broke into our world to save us, He can break into their world to save them.

II. Hope of Transformation is grounded in the incarnation of Jesus.

In vv. 18-25, we find the explanation of Jesus' birth. In these verses, we learn about Joseph's role. We do not have a lot of information about Joseph, but this text is one that teaches us about the man who would adopt Jesus as his son.

We should not believe that just because God chose Joseph and Mary to raise Jesus that their life was easy because it was not. The incarnation of the eternal Son of God immediately made life messy for them even though they submitted to God's plan.

Obedience to God was costly, but it was also transformative. Even the promise of Jesus began to transform them. In this text, we learn about the work Jesus did in Joseph's life.

¹ Douglas O'Donnell, *Preaching the Word series: Matthew: All Authority in Heaven and on Earth*, 42.

In v. 18, we learn that Joseph was engaged to Mary. We need to understand what engagement meant in first-century Judaism. A better word for their engagement is *betrothal*.

In first-century Judaism, betrothal was a year-long process. In essence, it was a binding contract to be married. For all practical purposes, the couple was married, although they did not live together, nor had they consummated the marriage. Because betrothal was a binding contract, to end this kind of engagement required a divorce.

At some point during the engagement, Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant. She either told him, someone noticed, or she was beginning to show. This was a really bad development because this meant one of two things. Either Mary had been unfaithful to Joseph, or Joseph and Mary had been unfaithful to God. No matter what they decided to do, there was going to be a lot of blame and shame for both of them. The small-town Jewish grapevine was going to be ripe with gossip.

Joseph's response teaches us something about him. His response shows us the kind of man God had chosen to raise Jesus. Joseph's response gives us some principles to imitate.

Verse 19 tells us that when Joseph learned of the pregnancy, he wanted to protect Mary as much as possible. He was a righteous man who was compassionate. He considered the situation and thought it would be best if very quietly and discreetly they divorced.

Joseph didn't want to shame Mary publicly. He could have done that. He had every right to bring her sin to light. He could have declared it to the whole village and had her publicly humiliated for her perceived sin. If he did it this way, he would exonerate himself and put all the blame on her. After all, not only was his reputation at stake; his whole future was at stake.

Yet, he did not want to do that. He was willing to bear as much of the shame as he could by divorcing her quietly. In this way, *her life* would not be completely destroyed. He could quietly move on with his life, and she could pick up the pieces and move forward as best as possible.

Yet, what happened next completely changed Joseph and, ultimately, the world. Look in vv. 20-23:

But after he had considered these things, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because what has been conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to name him Jesus, because 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 See, the virgin will become pregnant
and give birth to a son,
and they will name him Immanuel,
which is translated "God is with us."*

We learn that Joseph was thinking intensely about the situation. I can't say with certainty what he was doing, but since we know he was a righteous man, I think we can safely assume he was taking this situation to the Lord in prayer. He was troubled and mulling it over in his heart.

Then the Lord God breaks through in a dream that night. The Lord explains to him that Mary had not been unfaithful to him and was, in fact, pregnant by God's divine plan to save His people from their sin. Bottom line: God wanted Joseph to marry Mary and adopt Jesus to be his son.

Next, notice how the Lord addressed Joseph. He called him "*Joseph, son of David.*" Here is the significance of that title for Joseph. Joseph was, in fact, in the line of King David. The problem was that over the years and through the exile that David's bloodline had been lost. No one was following the Davidic line of kingship. So, although Joseph was in David's family line, no one cared . . . except God.

By adopting Jesus as his son, Joseph brought Jesus officially into King David's family line. Jesus' adoption was as good as a physical birth to qualify Him as in the line of King David. That is what adoption did then, and it is what it does now.

Friends, I know we have many people here who have adopted children or who have been adopted. I, myself, was adopted by my stepfather. I remember the process like it was yesterday. I remember sitting in the lawyer's office, answering questions and signing papers with my family.

If you have been through adoption at any level, it is amazing to know that our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, was adopted by Joseph. Our Lord is so compassionate that He provides families for those who have no family.

If you are adopted, then you should consider the special grace of God that has placed you in your family. Jesus, Himself has a special identification with you because of your adoption. You see, adoption is not a punishment. Adoption does not mean you are not wanted. Adoption does not mean you were forgotten. Adoption is a special gift of grace. Adoption is a gift of grace that Jesus experienced. If you have adopted, then you follow in the steps of Joseph. If you have been adopted, then you follow in the steps of Jesus. If you have been adopted, here is what you need to know. Those who have brought you into your family chose you specifically and especially as their own child. Let's keep going.

Next, let's consider Joseph's transformation. Initially, Joseph was going to take the path that seemed to bring the least amount of suffering for Mary and himself. Now, after the Lord comes to him, he makes the hard decision to marry her and adopt Jesus as his son. *The incarnation of Jesus into his life transformed him, and his obedience was costly.*

Let's make some application of the incarnation of Jesus into our lives through the life of Joseph.

1) The incarnation means hope of transformation. Do you ever look at people around you and wonder if they can really change? You may even look at your own life and wonder if you can change.

When Jesus broke into our world and became flesh and blood, He transformed Joseph and Mary. This is what Jesus does when He comes into a life. He changes it. He rearranges it. The power of the incarnation of the Son of God changes us so that we order our lives around Jesus and His church. *How has the incarnation of Christ transformed your life?*

2) The power of the incarnation humbles us. Think about it this way. Joseph decided to marry Mary and adopt Jesus. However, he was not going to get to name Jesus. He was not given the authority to name Jesus. This authority was given to God alone.

God told him what to name Jesus. The father names the child, and that is what "The Father" did. God named Jesus. To give the name means to be in a position of authority, and Joseph was not in that position, and he knew it. In essence, Joseph humbled himself before God and submitted to the rule of the true Father in Heaven.

The incarnation of the Son of God into flesh and blood begins in humility. The Apostle Paul tells us in Philippians 2 that Jesus humbled Himself and came into our world by taking the form of a servant. Then Paul tells us that we should have the same mind of humility as Christ.

In other words, the incarnation humbles us in how we treat others. In humility, we take the initiative to serve others. In humility, we take the initiative to put others first. In humility, we take the initiative to give of ourselves to others. In humility, we give others the benefit of the doubt when there is confusion or offenses. In humility, we take the initiative to forgive others. This is how the incarnation humbles us. *Has the incarnation of Jesus humbled you?*

3) The power of the incarnation brings us into Jesus' mission to preach the gospel in order to seek and save the lost. Verse 21 tells us that the child's name would be *Jesus*. *Jesus* is the Greek name for the Hebrew equivalent of *Joshua* which means *The Lord Saves*. Jesus' name declares His mission.

The incarnation into the lives of Joseph and Mary brought them into Jesus' mission to preach the gospel so that sinners so they will be saved. Their transformation meant they were now part of God's plan to save sinners.

This is what Jesus does when He comes into our lives. He does not save us and leave our lives untouched by His mission. His mission becomes the identifying mission of our lives. We may be moms, dads, and grandparents and have jobs and careers, but there is a redemptive thread of Jesus' mission that runs through the tapestry of our lives. Like Jesus, we live to see others come to faith in Him. *Is that your mission in life today?*

4) The power of the incarnation of Christ means God is with us in our suffering. Think about it this way. The incarnation of Christ into the lives of Joseph and Mary was not easy. As the narrative unfolds, we see it brought much suffering into their lives.

Their obedience was going to be costly. It was going to bring more suffering than a simple tarnish to a reputation. Life was going to be messy and broken for them.

By marrying Mary, outsiders would assume that Joseph got her pregnant during their engagement. Their marriage was going to cost him his reputation. Both Joseph and Mary would remain objects of gossip and shame all of their lives.

His obedience eventually meant the family would have to flee to Egypt to protect Jesus. Joseph's obedience eventually meant children would die in Bethlehem because of Jesus' birth. Bottom line: Joseph's obedience meant he and Mary were starting their marriage out in a very difficult way.

Yet, they were not alone in their suffering. *God was with them*. The promise of Immanuel means—*God is with us*.

Friends, when Jesus comes into your life, it does not mean life will get easier. Christianity does not mean all of the sudden you have no more pain and no more suffering. Often times when you commit your life to Christ, life gets much harder. But the promise of *Immanuel* is that God is with us in our suffering. He does not leave us or forsake us.

The incarnation of the Son of God into human flesh means that God has stepped into our human dilemma of suffering. He is not an aloof, distant god who only watches but does not understand our suffering.

God came in Christ and suffered. In Christ, our Creator suffered even more than we will ever suffer. He was the sinless Son of God who resisted sin to the point of shedding His blood. He was mocked and shamed His whole life. He was an outsider to everyone. He was despised and rejected by His own people. He was a man of sorrow because of our sin, and yet on the cross, He paid our debt of sin.

The incarnation means God intimately understands our pain and suffering. He knows our pain, and He hurts with us. He wants to help us carry the burden and pain of our suffering for us if we will give it to him.

Bottom line: The hope of the incarnation is hope for our transformation into the image of our Savior, who never leaves us to forsake us.

III. Hope of our Obedience is grounded in the incarnation of Jesus.

Finally, vv. 24-25 teaches us how the incarnation of Jesus moves us to obedience.

When Joseph woke up, he did as the Lord's angel had commanded him. He married her²⁵ but did not have sexual relations with her until she gave birth to a son. And he named him Jesus.

Here we see the beginning of Joseph's costly obedience. The Lord has spoken to Joseph, and now costly obedience follows. First, he married Mary. This was his first step of costly obedience to the Lord.

Second, we learn that he did not have sexual relations with her until after she gave birth to Jesus. So, not only were they starting their marriage out under great suspicion and shame, but now Joseph and Mary could not consummate the marriage until later. This was a stressful way to begin their marriage. They were finally officially married, but they had to wait to consummate the marriage.

This is what the incarnation of Jesus does. It gives us hope for obedience to our Lord and Savior. Jesus changes us. Jesus works in our lives in such a way that no matter what the cost is, we are willing to take up our cross daily and follow Jesus wherever He leads us.

The hope of our obedience is grounded in the incarnation of Jesus because Jesus gives us Himself to us. He saves us, transforms us, and fills us, so we become filled with joyful obedience to God. He is with us and never leaves those who trust in Him.

As we come to the end of our study of this text, we are faced with the same decision Joseph was. We can have a nice, easy-going life without Jesus, or we can have Jesus and all that comes with Him, but we can't have both. You see, when Jesus breaks into your world, He will change everything. He calls us to obey Him, and that obedience can be costly. There may be difficulties that come with that obedience. We will have to embrace them with the hope of knowing that God is with us, and because God is with us, our obedience means Jesus is being formed in us.