

My son celebrated his sixth birthday this week. We asked him, “What do you wish for your birthday?” We thought he would say a remote-control car or a new bike. Instead, he said, “I wish God would send dinosaurs back to earth.” Then he said, “Wait, no—even more than I want to see a dinosaur, I’d want to be there the night that Jesus was born.” The Advent devotionals that so many of us in our church are doing are making an impact in our home. Of all the things that we could wish for, that would be one of the greatest gifts of all. And that happens to be what our passage from Matthew is about today.

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. 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.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”). When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus. (Matthew 1:18-25)

This is a wonderful passage about the events leading up to Christmas. There are three people in this story: Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. We’re going to dive in to see what God’s Word teaches us about each of them. It’s the perfect way to prepare for Christmas! We’ll be with the three individuals who were part of the very first Christmas morning.

Let’s begin with Mary. We find several important descriptions of her in the gospels, the first of which is “highly favored.” When the angel spoke to her, he said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored!” Think about this: There have been over 100 billion people to walk this earth. Of those 100 billion people, God chose this woman to be the earthly mother of Jesus, his eternal son. Think about how picky parents are about who watches their kids when they leave for two hours on a dinner date. People want criminal background checks, six references, and high school GPA. People are over the top about who babysits their children for a night. God had to choose someone to raise Jesus. And of all the women who have ever lived, He chose Mary! Now, just because she is highly favored and God chose her for one of the most important tasks in all of history, doesn’t mean that we should think too highly of her, which has happened in different church traditions throughout history.

Our church has people from many different faith backgrounds. We have Baptists and Catholics and Pentecostals and Lutherans and people who have never been to church before. We are so grateful to have people from different ecumenical and theological streams, but it’s very helpful for us to know what the Bible teaches, and to have our opinions and convictions informed by the Bible, not by what certain church leaders started teaching hundreds of years after the Bible was written. We are so grateful that many Catholics and former Catholics worship with us, and though there are many wonderful things about the Catholic church, this is one area where it has gone beyond what the Bible teaches, leading to great confusion. The Catholic church teaches that Mary was sinless, that her birth was a miracle, and that she did not have a sin nature. The Bible doesn’t teach that at all! The Bible teaches that all have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God.

The Catholic church teaches that Mary remained a virgin. Again, that's contrary to Scripture. In Matthew 1:25, God's Word says that Joseph did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth—not that they never had intimacy, just that they weren't together until after Jesus was born, so there was no question that He was born of a virgin, from the Holy Spirit, fully God and fully man.

Perhaps one of the most unhelpful messages that has been taught about Mary is that we can speak to Mary, and she can pray to Jesus on our behalf. Early in Jesus' ministry there was a time that He was at a wedding. The hosts ran out of wine, and Mary, as the mother of Jesus, went to Jesus, using her motherly influence, and asked Him to do something about it. That resulted in His first miracle, turning water into wine. Using that as an example, some people have taught that if you really want Jesus to do something for you, you should pray to Mary and ask her to use her motherly influence to persuade Jesus to help you. This is the most unhelpful misconception of all because this is not only believing something that is untrue; this causes a serious distortion in your relationship with God and places a massive impediment in your interaction with Jesus. Every prayer in the Bible is directed to God, and God alone. People cannot communicate with Mary or any other person who has died. Jesus is our perfect and only mediator (1 Timothy 2:5). The usual response is, "We can ask our friends to pray for us, and Mary or other saints can pray for us just like our friends can." That's the common explanation, but it's non-biblical. The Bible specifically states that all our prayers are to be directed to God the Father, and it specifically prohibits trying to communicate with those who have died. The Bible teaches that Mary is highly favored by God. We want to hold her in the appropriate regard—what the Bible teaches, no less, but also no more!

We also know that Mary was worshipful. When the angel first spoke to Mary, she was troubled and confused. "I am a virgin; how could this be?" But as soon as the angel told her the plan, even though it was going to up-end and radically transform her life in ways she had never planned, what did she say? "I am the Lord's servant, may your word to me be fulfilled." Translation: "God, whatever you want from my life, it's yours." But her worship wasn't only in a posture of surrender; it was in the praise on her lips. Luke 1 records her song of praise in which she said: "My soul glorifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my savior." Almost every line of her song was a personalized quotation from the Scriptures, which means she read God's Word, she studied and memorized God's Word, internalizing it, so she could effortlessly incorporate it into praise.

Mary was also blessed. After she had conceived and was carrying Jesus inside of her, she said, "From now, all generations will call me blessed." There are some religious traditions that think too highly of Mary. They give her a status that contradicts the Bible. But just because some have erred on one side doesn't mean anyone else should err on the other side. The Bible says that from one generation to the next, we would look at her and realize how blessed she was, which means we should hold her up as an example of faith, obedience, worship, and femininity, and be inspired by the way she lived. We need role models like her in our day, and specifically for our women. I am not trying to say anything unkind about these people, but I don't want to tell my little 4-year-old girl to grow up to be like Taylor Swift or Ariana Grande or Kamala Harris, or any other movie star, politician, or musician the world says we are to look up to. You can tell a lot about a culture by who they see as their heroes. The Bible sets Mary up as a hero of the faith who we can look to for inspiration and imitation.

Matthew 1 not only tells us about Mary, but also about Joseph. We don't learn as much about Joseph as we do about Mary in the Bible, but we do get three crucial descriptions. First, he is faithful to God's law. Just like Mary knew the Scriptures and spontaneously sang the Scriptures, which flowed out of her instinctively, Joseph loved God's Word. Everything he read in God's Word he instantly desired to implement in his life. Mary was chosen to be Jesus' earthly mother; Joseph was chosen to be Jesus' earthly father. One of the attributes of his life that made him capable for such a task was his commitment and devotion to God's Word. Men in this church, if you want to see Jesus formed in your life, if you want to see Jesus formed in your household, if you want to be a steward of God's work in the world, this is one

of the single most impactful decisions you can make: commit yourself to reading God's Word and faithfully carrying out whatever He sets before you.

Joseph was also compassionate. When he found out his fiancé was pregnant, and obviously not by him since he had not been with her, there was only one logical conclusion: she had slept with another man. They were engaged, but technically, as soon as the promise was made, in Jewish culture they were considered married. In his mind, this woman had cheated on him. She had committed adultery and had broken his trust, and it would have been natural for him to want to defend himself in the community by pointing out her mistake. She is the one who did wrong, she should have to take the fall. That's what anyone else would have done, but what does the Bible say Joseph did? Joseph did not want to expose her to public disgrace, and he had in mind to divorce her quietly. Though he was sure Mary cheated on him, he was compassionate and gracious and wanted to protect her reputation. We live in a day where every time someone makes a mistake, they are publicly shamed, ridiculed, and canceled. That's how we've been trained. But the Bible says whoever would foster love covers over an offense (Proverbs 17:9). As a loving, compassionate man, he didn't want to do anything that would harm Mary.

Not only was he compassionate, Joseph was also obedient. God spoke to Joseph through a dream and told him, "Mary isn't lying—this pregnancy really is from the Holy Spirit. She is going to give birth to my son who will be the Messiah, and you are to give Him the name Jesus." What was Joseph's response? "When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him" (Matthew 1:24). This wasn't the only time. Three different times God gave Joseph instructions, and every time God spoke, Joseph did exactly what God told him the moment God told him. Not almost obedience. Not delayed obedience. Instant, complete obedience. This is what I try to teach my children all the time. I tell them, "When I give you an instruction, I want you to stop whatever you are doing, pay total attention to me, and then do exactly what I ask you to do. Do it with all your heart; do it with a joyful spirit; do it right away." As I am training that in my children, I can hear God speaking in my heart: "Dan, when I give you an instruction, I want you to stop whatever you are doing, pay total attention to me, and then do exactly what I ask you to do. Do it with all your heart; do it with a joyful spirit; do it right away." Joseph is the perfect role model for our life. We want to champion and chase down biblical manhood. Joseph, with his faithfulness to God's law, his compassionate heart, and his obedience, is a wonderful example of that! Our upcoming men's conference is a wonderful opportunity for you to learn to pay attention to God's instructions.

In this passage we learn about Mary and Joseph, but most importantly, we learn about Jesus. We learn three aspects of his identity and mission on this opening page. First, we learn that Jesus was to be born of a virgin by the power of the Spirit. Understandably, this is a very difficult idea for us to grasp. How could Mary, a virgin, have the Spirit work in her life in such a way that God supernaturally enabled her to become pregnant? This is like trying to understand the inner workings of the trinity—God being three in one. It exceeds our mind's ability to understand exactly how this happened, but we know why it happened: so Jesus could be both fully human and fully God. He was conceived from Mary (fully human), but also from the Holy Spirit (fully God). Because He was truly human, Jesus can relate to us and understand the frailty of humanity. He knew what it's like to be sick, tired and hungry, what it's like to be mistreated, betrayed, and abandoned, what it's like to lose a loved one, what it's like to experience death. Because He became fully human, Jesus can understand and relate to our entire experience. But He's also God, which means not only can He understand us, but He also has the power to rescue and deliver us. Because He was both fully human and fully God, Jesus lived as no other human ever lived before. He overcame the enticement of sin. He overcame the allure of the world. He overcame the temptation of the flesh. He overcame the attacks of Satan. And after he was crucified, killed, and laid in a tomb, He overcame the grave. He defeated death itself. As fully God, He did what no other human could do. The book of Hebrews says He is a pioneer, a trailblazer, which means He carved out a path that no one had taken before, and after carving the path, He paved the trail He just blazed so that we could follow after Him and do what He did. By putting our faith in Him and following Him, we can overcome the

world, the flesh, Satan, sin, and death. We can live fully human lives, the abundant, joyful, victorious lives for which God created us. All of this is possible only because Jesus was fully human and fully God, born of a virgin, by the power of the Spirit.

The second aspect of Jesus' identity highlighted in Matthew 1 is that He will be called Immanuel— God with us. I'm friends with a family in our church and the husband / father is in the military. He was deployed on assignment for an entire year. He had to leave his house and his family and go a long way away. His distance doesn't make him any less a father and husband; it doesn't make their love less powerful, but the distance is challenging. When his daughter has a hard day, he can't hold her and give her a hug. When his son has a big game, he can't be there in the stands to cheer him on. There are phone calls and texts and FaceTime, but the distance is hard. How much more so for us and God! We know He's real. We know He's our creator and heavenly father, but for thousands of years of human history, He seemed so far away. But when the angel spoke to Joseph, he said that day is coming. Christmas morning is coming! No more phone calls. No more FaceTime. No more text messages. Immanuel! God in the flesh. God with us. The God who is near!

One more thing we learn about Jesus: we are told He will save us from our sins. We all have sins. We all have areas in our lives where we have fallen short of God's standards. God's word not only says that all have sinned, but also that the wages for sin is death. There are consequences for sins that cannot simply be ignored or glossed over. A couple weeks ago there was public outcry by people on both sides of the political isle when President Biden offered a blanket pardon to his son for all criminal and illegal activity over the course of a ten-year period. Everyone gets that a father doesn't want his child to go to jail, but even people on the far left were saying, "That's not right. That's not just." Even if you care about someone and love them, you can't erase the consequences of their crimes. Justice should be served. That's what is so beautiful about the God of Christianity. He is the king of the universe. And He's also a loving Father. When we, His children, commit sin and rebel, turning to our own ways, He doesn't violate justice and say, "You're magically forgiven!" But he also doesn't make us pay the penalty ourselves. He is so loving, and he is so just, that he comes to earth to pay the price of our penalty on our behalf. Jesus came to take our sins away!

A couple weeks ago Keren was cleaning up the kids' bathroom, which is always a delightful task. Hudson noticed she was having to scrub the sink pretty hard to get some of their old toothpaste up. Hudson said, "Mom, I know what you should do—use my electric toothbrush to get it up." Keren said, "That's meant for cleaning your teeth, not the bathroom!" Hudson said, "I don't think so mom. I clean the bathroom with it all the time, and it really gets the difficult stuff out." We ordered him a new toothbrush that night. There are some things you can scrub clean. Our sins aren't among them. We can't do anything about them on our own, but Jesus can.

But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:5-6)

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:21)

Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea. (Micah 7:9)

That's why all of this took place—so that Jesus could save us from our sins. That's why Mary gave birth as a virgin, why Joseph took her as his wife. This is what Christmas is all about. Not what people might give us, but what Jesus took from us: he took our sins to the cross when he died for us. The Bible says if you confess with your mouth Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. You can make that decision today!