

## **Sunday School Lesson December 13, 2020**

Good morning, I hope you are well and feel blessed.

Lesson for December 13, 2020, "Called Before Birth"

Background Scripture from Matthew 1:18-25

From the section, Stepping into the Word. In this lesson we focus on Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus, who is called a, "righteous man" in Matthew's gospel. Other translations call him faithful, just, good, and kind-hearted. We see several indications that he desires the best for Mary. Obeying God, he steps out to fulfill his calling, and as a result he helps Jesus fulfill his own call too. Joseph's model also invites us to consider the ways faithfulness to our own call empowers those around us to be faithful to their call as well.

This lesson encourages us to think about the people who have influenced us in the same way: by encouraging us to be faithful to the person God created us to be.

Matthew and Luke both include a "fleshed out" narrative of the nativity. Some claim John doesn't include the nativity in his gospel. He does, in one verse, "The Word became flesh and dwelled among us." Matthew and Luke do differ, in their account of Jesus' birth. Matthew records the birth of Jesus through the eyes of Joseph. Joseph is almost the main character in Matthew's account. Luke definitely records the nativity as seen through Mary's eyes. Many believe Luke, the physician/historian/evangelist/author of two biblical books, actually conversed with Mary.

Joseph's name was a proud name, recalling the ancient Jewish name of one of the twelve patriarchs, Joseph the son of Jacob who was sold by his brothers into Egypt and who later became second to Pharaoh in power over all Egypt, saving his family from famine. His name means "to add." Joseph was no doubt older than Mary. While girls were married by 13 or 14, husbands on the other hand needed to be established enough to support a wife, before they could enter into marriage. In first century Galilee, Joseph would take Mary home to the house in which he lived with his parents, and perhaps grandparents, as well as brothers and sisters who might be at home. Only as his own family grew, would Joseph and his family likely get their own house. This may sound very crowded and non-private to you, but it had its advantages. Instead of a young couple out on their own, in a large household, each member contributed to the economy of the family by their

own work, making enough for the whole to subsist on. A couple cut off from the economy of the extended family, would have to fend for themselves, as Mary and Joseph had to do in Bethlehem.

We know from later in Matthew's gospel that Joseph was a carpenter, by trade (Matthew 13:55). But the town of Nazareth was small enough that carpentry wouldn't have been all he did. Carpenters and other tradesmen would also keep a garden and a couple of animals for food and perhaps do some subsistence farming to eke out a living in this agrarian society of rural Galilee. But when townspeople needed some carpentry done that was beyond their own skills and tools, Joseph would be the one they came to.

As a rule the common man built his own house, probably with the help of family and neighbors. A family might have a knife and hammer of some kind. But a carpenter would possess both specialized tools, some fairly expensive, and the skills to use them -- saws, axes, awls, drills, plumb lines, chisels, and planes, some of which have been recovered by archeologists.<sup>5</sup>

With these tools, a skilled carpenter might fashion doors, beams, and perhaps gates. He would make plows and yokes and other wood implements. There was no local Nazareth Furniture Store; all furniture would be made by hand. Each town had a rich family or two. They would be wanting some nice things made and their money would help the economy of the carpenter's family.

Carpentry didn't make Joseph wealthy. The offering Mary and Joseph brought to the temple on the occasion of Mary's purification from childbirth was the offering of a poor man, a pair of doves or pigeons (Luke 2:24; Leviticus 12:8). Carpentry was Joseph's world, and the world that Jesus grew up in. Carpentry was Joseph's trade and the trade he taught his son. Jesus learned from Joseph to saw and plane, drill and smooth. He watched his father, make business contracts and deal with customers.

In reading Matthew's Gospel, it is important to understand the early church's understanding of the Messiah. In a section of Isaiah known as "The Servant's Song," the inspired prophet offers the Jewish people a vision of the Messiah. He is the "suffering Messiah." We are even given a glimpse at the crucified Messiah. In the early chapters of Isaiah, we are given a vision of the world migrating to Israel from where light, truth and righteousness emerge. In Isaiah chapter 7 that we are introduced to the name of "Immanuel" (God is with us).

Jesus' message that one had to take up their cross to follow him was not attractive to the masses near the end. The disciples were human and flawed. However, they must be commended for staying with Jesus. They too

believed in a Messiah who would deliver Israel from Rome. When it became apparent that Jesus would not call people to take up arms and overthrow Rome, the disciples stayed, or at least through Jesus' arrest. Jesus' kingdom was of a very different nature. It was spiritual and eternal. Matthew sees Jesus through his Jewish eyes. Matthew, more than other authors of the gospels, ties the Messiah to the Old Testament and Mosaic Law.

Joseph reveals his compassion and his kind heart in the narrative. By Jewish law he has the right to see that Mary is executed. The lesser response would be to divorce her. He is kind and loving and he chooses not to do such a thing to young Mary. The only other option he sees is to divorce her quietly to avoid bringing shame upon her. Remember, when one was betrothed, even though the wedding had not occurred, they were legally bound under Jewish law. He sees divorce as his only choice. If he divorces Mary, she will never be able to marry. No Jewish man could honorably marry her. Jewish law stated that a divorced woman could not remarry, but the man could.

Joseph's entire life is altered through one dream involving angelic visitation. Joseph must have been astounded that an angel would visit him. In verse 20 the angel proclaims to Joseph that Mary is carrying a child "through the Holy Spirit." What could that possibly mean to Joseph? Mary did not become pregnant through the sin of sexual infidelity; in innocence, in some mystical manner, she is with child through the Spirit.

Mary was a peasant girl, most likely in her mid to late teens. People tended to be betrothed to someone in their same social standing. She too is faithful to Judaism. She had to have great determination and faith. She is about to face the first of several serious incidences in her life. She will face the accusations and finger pointing in own hometown. It was very difficult for Mary and Joseph to understand her pregnancy. The angelic proclamation brought her some hope that God was at work in her life, but she struggled to understand what God was doing.

The discovery of her pregnancy erased the joy of her upcoming wedding and marriage. It would place her in a place in life she never considered. She will give birth in a manger, in Bethlehem. She would have to journey several miles while pregnant from Nazareth to Bethlehem. She lives through the most agonizing experience for any parent. She will watch her beloved son suffer horribly and eventually die. She is blessed to become a follower of her resurrected son.

We are given the content of Joseph's dream in the narrative. The angel proclaims to Joseph that the child will be named "Jesus." Names were extremely important to the Jewish people. Names had meaning. They

reflected either what was occurring during the time of the person's birth, a character attribute, or the destiny for the person. Names also were associated with their character. If we pray in Jesus' name we are praying in the character of Jesus, "as Jesus would pray."

The name Jesus means "he will save his people from their sins." In Hebrew he is Yeshua, related to Joshua, which means the "God will save." Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew Yeshua. The destiny of Jesus is not to overthrow a government. Jesus is to save us *from our sins*. His kingdom and government are not of this world; therefore, Jesus' mission was not to liberate Israel from Rome. This world is to be redeemed by the eternal spiritual Kingdom Jesus brings.

Matthew is determined to ensure we know that Jesus is the fulfillment of Old Testament scripture. His Jewishness is evident from the opening of his gospel. He relates the events associated with the nativity to texts in the Old Testament.

The genealogy in Matthew definitely ties Jesus to the Old Testament. The genealogy anchors Jesus in the line of David. It was proclaimed the Messiah would come through the line of David. The Old Testament plays a major role in our understanding of who Jesus is. We use the word trinity to describe Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We use metaphors in an attempt to teach the reality of the trinity. Jesus is divine and human. We may not intellectually be able to grasp this truth. However, based on our knowledge of what Jesus said about himself and the way the first disciples understood Jesus' nature, we can accept this remarkable truth. Our acceptance of Jesus' divine/human nature is not a stab in the dark. It is the acknowledgement of the limitations of our intellect.

Outside the birth of Jesus, Joseph and Mary would have been an ordinary, unknown couple during the turn of the century. They are extremely important to Christianity. Young teen Mary conceived a son without knowing a man. Joseph had to decide what to do in a situation that was beyond comprehension. The two accepted and enacted their callings through faithful obedience. They had to totally trust God. Their circumstances move against the grain of human and social expectation and belief. No one becomes pregnant out of wedlock. No one would marry a woman betrothed to them if she was with child from an unknown source. Yet, they did. By faith. We can only begin to understand the faith and courage of these two. Joseph was the perfect father to rear young Jesus. Mary was the perfect protective nurturing mother. In this historical moment the divine and human are wed in which God's utter grace is made known, and the couple's humanity reaches for that grace in utter faith.

In Matthew's account of the nativity, God chooses the most common people. We may feel like we are one amid millions. God's power to know each and every one of us is incredible. Do you believe God can use you in redeeming the world?

From the section, Stepping into the World. Who we are called to be and how we respond to that call influences the people around us. Joseph did what God called him to do, and in that process he undergirded and supported Mary as Jesus' mother. Sometimes we find it difficult to know exactly what God is calling us to do. Sometimes we know what God is calling us to do, but we can't figure out how to do it, or we can't find the strength to do it. Sometimes we resist obeying. Sometime we do our best to follow God, and later we look back and wonder if we did the right thing.

In order to hear God's voice, we usually need to make some space to listen and to reflect on what we might be hearing. God can speak to us anywhere and in any situation. God is not limited by our willingness to be attentive. However, taking time for Bible study, prayer reflection and other spiritual practices usually make it easier for us to hear God's voice.

Conversations and support from other Christians also help us evaluate what we believe we are hearing, and help us find the strength and willingness to follow God. Among the many gifts the Body of Christ has to give us, one gift is help with discernment in hearing God's voice and encouragement as we try to follow what we hear. Obeying out call may very well make it possible for someone else to follow their own.

Prayer: Almighty God, the mysteries of life have confounded us, yet we are blessed through what you have taught us. Empower us to seek your light and hope, both present in the darkest moments. Use us to proclaim your love of the world and your redeeming will moving through history. In Jesus' name, Amen.

**Closing: For the love that casts out fear, the faith that sustains and the hope that never perishes, be with us now and forever more. Amen. God watch over us and take care of us.**

Next week's lesson December 20, 2020, "A Regal Response to Holy Light"

Background Scripture Matthews 2:7-15.

*Sources for this lesson: The Bible, International Sunday School Lesson and Commentary, MacArthur New Testament Commentary, Matthew Chapter 18*

*Sunday School Lesson from Dr. Craig Rikard, a South Georgia Pastor and The Present Word Adult Bible Lessons.*