

A Nasty Rumour about Jesus' Birth
Matthew 1:18-25

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How do you know Jesus is with you? Were you aware of Jesus' presence with you at work, at school, or at home or when you were alone? There are times we may feel close to Him. We sense His care and concern for us. We walk in constant awareness of His presence and see His fingerprints around us every day. We naturally turn to prayer multiple times. We sense Him in our spirit and in all we experience.

But there are other times when we wonder if He's distant or silent or maybe even gone. Things happen that cloud our vision of Him or batter our belief that He's present right here and right now. Or maybe you don't believe that Jesus or God is present with you. Maybe you believe that Jesus is somewhere in heaven and looks down on what's going on here. And maybe He looks at your life and circumstances when the earth rotates so St. Albert is right in front of him. But the rest of the time He doesn't see you at your job or at home or when you're alone or when you face trouble. Is Jesus with us? How can we know? What can we do to recapture an awareness of Jesus' presence and power in our lives?

One way is to recall what we know about Jesus. In one of our small group gatherings, someone shared about a difficult time they were going through in their lives. One of their friends first asked them the question. "What do you feel about God or towards God?" After they shared what they felt about God, their friend asked them a second question. "Now, what do you know about God?" That question altered the focus towards knowledge about God and His character. That translated into a greater confidence of God's presence and provision in the situation.

The same is true for us today. The more we know about Jesus, the greater confidence we can have in His power and presence in our lives today (if we are one of His).

If we doubt the presence of Jesus in our lives or we don't feel close to Him, we need to revisit what we know about Him. If you will pay attention today, you may leave here knowing more about Jesus than when you came. The more you know, the more you can draw from in those times when you wonder if He's present with you. We will discover more about Jesus today as we take the next step in the Matthew series. We started a couple of weeks ago looking at the genealogy Matthew provides in the first 17 verses of the book. Remember the irregularities in that genealogy? Remember the 5 women? Some had been involved in some scandal. Some were not Jewish. Yet Matthew showed that Jesus had the right lineage to fulfill the expectations of the anointed one. He concluded by declaring "So

all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen and from Babylon to the Christ fourteen.

Now Matthew will describe how Jesus' birth took place. As we walk through this account, we will know more about Jesus and about God's powerful and personal presence in the lives of Joseph, Mary and Jesus. With that discovery, we will come to the Lord's Table to eat with Him and draw near to Him.

Matthew 1:18-25 (ESV)

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus Christ¹ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed^l to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from 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 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ²³ "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us). ²⁴ When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, ²⁵ but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

How was God powerfully and personally present in this account?

First we see God present in the absolutely unique conception of Jesus. Verse 18 again – "When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit." Matthew declares that the Holy Spirit came upon a betrothed young girl named Mary in a supernatural way that caused the conception of Jesus.

Matthew does not try to disguise this. He does not try to slide it past the readers in hope that they won't really notice this. He makes it plain and clear that this was a supernatural, unique, "never done before or since" event. Before Joseph and Mary came together she was with child. But how did it happen? Joseph was not involved in causing this pregnancy.

Now in the first century, they did not have as much revelation as we do about the Holy Spirit. But the people of God knew the Holy Spirit from the Old Testament. They knew that He was often associated with creative and powerful ability. We find the "Spirit of God" in the second verse of the Bible hovering over the face of the waters at creation. The Spirit of the Lord empowered Samson to do great and mighty works. So the possibility of the Holy Spirit doing

something powerful and creative was not unknown to the first century believer. But a virginal conception was something totally unexpected.

And it was about to cause some great distress for Mary and Joseph. Matthew notes that Mary was betrothed. This was like our engagement today but much more serious and binding. It involved quite a process. A young man's parents usually picked a young girl from another family when she was about 12 or 13 years old. The young man was between 15-18 years old. They had a formal betrothal ceremony binding the man and woman together. When you were betrothed, you were to regard one another as husband and wife already except in the way that leads to family. After the formal betrothal ceremony, they usually waited a year. Why? Well, it may have been for the husband and wife to get to know each other a little. It may have been to give the groom time to build a house for his new family. It may have been to prove the young woman was not pregnant. After the year, there would be a wedding celebration where the groom would come to the bride's family house with all his attendants. Then the bride and groom would go into a specially prepared bedroom. They would pray together and then consummate the marriage. And if you don't know what consummate means, you can ask your parents or grandma or friend later on.

So this happens, while the wedding party waits outside the room. Talk about pressure! But that was still not the end of the sealing of the marriage covenant. The bride's family had to produce a special cloth that was there in the wedding bed. Then after the marriage had been consummated, the bride's family or the bride herself would collect this cloth and keep it with the evidence on it. This was insurance for later on if the husband would ever make an accusation against his wife for pre-marital impurity. If you want to read more about this, go back to Deuteronomy 22:13-21 for more details. And after that, apparently the bride and groom would go back out to join a joyful procession to the groom's home. Awkward! There, they would join together in a feast.

But this would not be the case in Mary and Joseph's situation. Mary was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit before they came together. So why would God do it this way? Why have Jesus conceived in the womb of a virgin?

An absolutely unique conception of a child by the Holy Spirit in Mary points to His divine origin. The conception of Jesus is unlike any other in the history of the human race. Through this supernatural conception, full deity and full humanity are united in one person.

But there's more to the significance of the virgin birth. A virgin conception signals that Jesus' humanity was without sin. Jesus had no earthly father through which the sin nature could be transmitted. But what about Mary's sin nature? Well, if God is able to accomplish the virgin conception, He is also able to somehow protect Jesus from Mary's sin nature. And if you come from a Catholic background, you might be gagging a little that I used Mary and sin in the same sentence. But we don't see evidence or claims in the Bible that Mary was sinless. She was just an ordinary girl, faithful, God fearing, but not sinless. Through the Holy Spirit's overshadowing Mary in the conception, the line of sin was interrupted so that Jesus was born holy. He did not sin during His earthly life so that when the time came for the cross, He was truly a sinless sacrifice.

Yet these glorious truths would only be unfolded in the years after Jesus' life. Mary and Joseph had to live with the situation. Joseph does not believe Mary's explanation. Verse 19 – "And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly." By this time, Mary was about 4 months pregnant. She had been away to visit Elizabeth. When she returns, she likely tries to explain the miraculous happening that occurred in her. But who has ever heard of such of thing? What would Joseph do?

Well think about what he has already been through. He's gone through a betrothal ceremony. His family has likely paid a bride price to the bride's family to seal the covenant and bind the two families together. He had likely received a dowry from Mary's father to help them start a new family. He may have started building a house. And he was anticipating life with Mary. He cannot understand Mary's claims and concludes that somehow she has been unfaithful.

He had legal right to accuse her publicly. Though the law stated that such a woman should be stoned, in Jesus' time this rarely happened. Instead, the man was entitled to receive the bride price back and formally break the betrothal in an act of divorce. The bride & her family would suffer incredible shame.

Joseph is a just man. He fears God. So we can read verse 19 and conclude that he decides to exercise his justice by divorcing his betrothed. But did Joseph's justness or righteousness lead him to decide to divorce her or to protect her from shame? Notice how Matthew puts it in verse 19 – "And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. His justness influences his unwillingness to put her to shame.

Craig Keener writes "In the broadest sense, a righteous person is one whose life is bounded by the reality of God, meaning both purity of life and compassion of heart." Joseph aims to do both. He wants to maintain purity in his

relationship with God. But he also wants to show compassion. This reflects God's heart. In both Mary and Joseph, we see another example of God's presence in this situation. **God chooses a young girl who responds to the angel's news and all it will require of her with "I am the Lord's servant."** **God chooses a young man named Joseph after his own heart who shows purity and compassion.** So Joseph resolves to divorce her quietly.

But God again demonstrates His presence and power. **An angel appears to Joseph in a dream.**

The angel explains Mary's conception as a miracle by the Holy Spirit. Joseph needed this information to go ahead with the marriage with a clear conscience. The angel exhorts Joseph to not fear. Despite the angel's explanation, Joseph and Mary will face the suspicions and whispering about the unborn child.

The angel goes further. **He tells Joseph the name of the child.** "You shall name him Jesus for he will save his people from their sins." "Jesus" is an anglicized form of the Hebrew Yeshua or Joshua meaning "the Lord Saves." The name Jesus was a common name in the first century. Jewish families gave this name to their sons as a symbolic hope for the anticipated salvation God would send. The people of that time expected salvation to come in the form of national liberator. They looked for a Messiah who would save Israel from Roman oppression and purify his people. Many looked for physical salvation from the hardships they had suffered under various conquering forces, including the current iron fist of Rome.

But Jesus would save his people from their sins. This was much more profound and deeper than deliverance from a foreign nation. A political savior delivers people from an external oppressor. The salvation from sin delivers from an internal oppressor that afflicts everyone except Jesus Himself. Jesus – savior from sin.

So God has demonstrated His power and presence through the virgin conception. God demonstrates His power and wisdom in the selection of Mary and Joseph to bear this absolutely unique child. God demonstrates His power and presence sending an angel to reassure Joseph to take Mary as his wife.

Then Matthew shows us how God was present in directing a prophet to forecast this event. (1:22-23) "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken through the prophet Behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and they shall call him Immanuel." God spoke through a prophet 700 years before to write about his unique conception. Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14 – Behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son." Isaiah spoke during a time of great national crisis. He challenged King Ahaz to turn to the Lord for deliverance in this crisis. But Ahaz refused. So Isaiah

proclaims that the Lord himself would give him a sign and that would be a virgin conceiving and bearing a son. Now it is possible that this prophecy was fulfilled in Ahaz's time when a virgin known to him conceived through the usual means and had a son. Before he could tell the difference between choosing evil and doing good, Israel would be saved.

But the ultimate fulfillment of this prophecy would come when the virgin Mary conceived in an unnatural way. God was present to inspire the prophet 700 years previous and He was present in directing Matthew to discern the fulfillment in Jesus.

Then God goes one step further to demonstrate his presence with His people. **He inspires the prophet to give the title "God with us" to the child.** "and they shall call his name Immanuel," which means God with us. The Son of God's coming in the flesh was the ultimate expression of God with His people up to that time. You wonder if God is present with us today – He gave His Son the title "God with us".

God has always desired to be with His people ever since the separation happened in the Garden. God expresses this throughout the Old Testament like in Leviticus 26:12 – "I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people". We look forward to a time when we will experience God's presence more fully than we currently do. Revelation 21:3 – And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God."

But Jesus' coming the first time demonstrated both God's desire and action to be present with His people.

The passage concludes with Joseph's obedience. He wakes from his sleep. He does as the angel commands. He takes Mary as his wife but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. Now think about what that required of Joseph. He took her as his wife. Did that mean they were able to have a wedding celebration where he went to her house and processed back to his house? Were they able to have a banquet in the front courtyard of his house? If they did, how would he explain that they were not going into the wedding chamber to consummate the marriage?

Maybe they didn't have a regular wedding because it was obvious to everyone that Mary was pregnant. Yet if he took her to be his wife, that meant she came into his house. Families that lived in poverty like most of the families of that time did not have multiple beds. They likely slept in the same bed. Joseph is 18 she is maybe 14. Yet he knew her not. Isn't it ironic? The neighbors and community declared them immoral. But they were actually a model of great purity and restraint? They determined to bear with the shame in order to preserve the sanctity of God's call.

Matthew does not take us through the journey to Bethlehem. He does not talk about angels or shepherds or even take us to the manger. He simply declares that Joseph “knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he (Joseph) called his name Jesus.”

God accomplishes His salvation purposes. He has brought His Son into the world to save His people from their sins. He has accomplished His purpose of being present with His people.

But what about you and me? We return to the question we began with. How do you know Jesus is really with you? We said that one way to discover this is to know more about Jesus and God Himself. What do we now know about God and Jesus and their presence in this story? God was present in the virginal conception. He was present in the selection of the young girl and her betrothed to parent His Son. God showed up in a dream to Joseph giving him the info he needed to move forward and naming the child. God was present in inspiring the prophet Isaiah to write the prophecy 700 years before the event. God was present with Joseph and Mary to strengthen them to remain pure until the baby was born. Jesus became “God with us” upon his birth. That’s a lot of power and presence in the lives of just 2 people.

This account tells us that Jesus came and was present to live a life and die a death to save you and me from our sins. As I continue to read the Gospels and letters, I discover verse after that verse that talks about living in Christ in us and the dwelling place of God is in those who trust in and believe in Him. And I hear Jesus say “And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age.”

But we still might struggle. How do you know Jesus is really with you? How can we know the virgin conception really happened? And most of us have not experienced dramatic moments where angel choirs showed up or an angel from the Lord appears to us in a dream and tells us exactly what to do.

Maybe this will help. A young man was engaged to be married. But he struggled with trusting his fiancée, because in an earlier relationship, a young lady he loved had been unfaithful to him. He didn’t know how he could ever really trust a woman again. His fear began to paralyze his relationship with his fiancée – fear of being hurt again and of being ridiculed for having an unfaithful wife. But then he read about Joseph’s obedience with respect to Mary. He learned two important lessons. First he learned that trust is not 100% knowledge. Rather trust required belief in what he had seen and heard in his fiancée’s life. Then on the basis of what he knew to be true, he believed her. That was scary for him because he could be made a fool again. But the second thing he learned was that once he came to the point where

he believed her, he then had to put their relationship in God's hands. He had to trust God to keep them both faithful to the relationship. So his real trust is in God. He has learned a key lesson about a Christian marriage, which is founded on mutual trust but energized and maintained by the power of God.

But the key for our purposes today contains his discovery that trust is not 100% knowledge about God. We don't have 100% knowledge about Him. We don't have all the information about how the virgin conception worked. But we do have a lot of information about God through His Word. We learn about His character, faithfulness, trustworthiness and presence. We will discover a lot about Jesus through Matthew and many of you have discovered much more about Him in your years of walking with the Lord. So when it comes to believing Jesus is present with us we too have to lean on what we know about Jesus life. We must lean on what we have discovered Him to teach. We too must remember the times we experienced a more obvious presence of the Lord. With what we have seen and heard of God, we trust Him with that. We then focus on the character and faithfulness of God. We turn not just to what we feel but what we know we can't explain or don't know fully.

The absolutely unique conception of Jesus Christ demonstrates God's power and presence in the world. This same Jesus grew up and died on a cross at a moment in history to save us from our sins. He lives today and invites us to His table to remember that great sacrifice and look forward to His return.