

Turn a Test into a Testimony

Series: Only God Can

Matthew 1:18-25

December 13, 2020

Welcome again to worship.

We are in the 3rd week of Advent and our series “Only God Can.”

The first week, we looked at the story of the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist. We learned only God can turn a mess into a message.

Last week, we looked at the story of the angel Gabriel telling Mary how she would become pregnant with the Christ child. We learned that only God can turn a trial into a triumph.

Today, we will look at this pregnancy announcement from Joseph’s perspective, so I invite you to turn in your Bible to Matthew 1:18-25.

This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. Joseph, her fiancé, was a good man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly. As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream.

“Joseph, son of David,” the angel said, “do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord’s message through his prophet: “Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means ‘God is with us.’” When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife. But he did not have sexual relations with her until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus.¹

Let’s get some background here to begin with. Engagement or betrothal at this time was more binding than engagements are today. Mary and Joseph’s parents likely arranged their marriage when they were children. But before the actual engagement, both Mary and Joseph had to agree to the marriage. Then the marriage would be announced. Joseph had to pay at least part of the bride price. The Betrothal, which commonly lasted a year, meant that bride and groom were officially pledged to each other, but had not yet consummated the marriage; advances toward anyone else were thus regarded as adulterous.²

When you look at the story, and Joseph’s discovery that his betrothed was somehow pregnant, it instantly became a test in his life. It was not something he would have ever thought would happen, especially not to him.

We are the same, aren’t we? Bad things happen to others, not us.

Sometimes in life, we are put through a test. We are tested all the time. Let me share a few ways we are tested.

First, we are tested to see our knowledge. When we have been students, we are tested all the time: math, English, spelling, etc. We are tested, yes to see how much we have earned, but testing also pushes us to actually learn things not just to pass the

¹ Matthew 1:18-25 (NLT2)

² Bible Background Commentary, Matthew 1:18

test, but to learn them of life. When I was learning how to fly, I had to learn the appropriate altitudes when flying, say eastbound, else I might accidentally crash into another airplane in midair, and I don't have to tell you the consequences of failing that test. So, we are tested to see how much we have learned.

In the time of Jesus' birth, all Jewish children received education. Like today, as soon as you are born, you start to learn the language that is spoken around you. In this case, it was Aramaic; a combination of Hebrew and Babylonian. In addition to learning their first language at home, children also learned how to read and write at home.

Let me first address education for girls. For Mary and other girls of her time, they received all their education at home. A girl's mother taught her what she needed to know to be a good wife and mother. She would learn a variety of skills, such as weaving, spinning, and treating illnesses. She might also learn to sing and dance and play a musical instrument such as a flute or harp.

And her education was not just how to run a home; it also was to help her guide her family in worship of the Lord and observance of the Law. She learned about such things as dietary laws, which had to do with the family's devotion to God. A girl learned how to make the home ready for special holidays and Sabbath. In such preparation, she learned the meaning of the customs and history behind the events, which she would pass on to her children. Girls learned the practical side of the laws the boys studied.

Formal education was only allowed for boys, and it began at the age of 5 in a local synagogue, where they were taught by rabbis. Synagogues had an equivalent of both elementary and secondary school. In "elementary school," boys studied the written Torah. They wrote on papyrus scrolls, which were up to 30' long. They also learned Hebrew, the language of the Scriptures. Studying Scripture often times consisted of memorization, repetition and reading out loud.

When Joseph turned ten, he would have entered "secondary school," in which he studied the oral Torah, and learned Greek, which was considered the language of business and politics in the Roman world. When he reached the age of twelve, the Jews believed his education in the Torah was complete enough to help him know the Law and keep it. He was then known as a "son of the Law."

So, the angel's appearance to Joseph tested of his knowledge of the Law and Prophets. The Law was very specific regarding the news of Mary being pregnant. It said that a woman who was guilty of being unfaithful should be stoned to death.

But Matthew also indicates the importance of knowing the Prophets, probably not Joseph's first thought when he heard the news. Did you know there are 15 Old Testament prophecies that are fulfilled in the birth of Jesus? In particular, the prophecy of Isaiah, who said:

"Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means 'God is with us.'"³

Joseph's test involved his knowledge of the Law and the Prophets, which led to his second test.

We are tested to see our character.

My character was tested just this week.

BEST BUY EXTRA SWITCH

³ Matthew 1:23 (NLT2)

For Joseph, the Mosaic Law was very specific with regard to Mary's news. But this man Joseph was a remarkable man. We devote a great deal of attention to Mary, and rightly so. She was a remarkable person. Remember that she was the one whom God chose to be the mother of our Lord, and God makes no mistakes. He picked the right girl.

While all of this is true, we need to remember that God also chose Joseph. God made no mistake in choosing him either. A hot-headed man would immediately have had Mary stoned to death or would have made her a public example by exposing her.

Put yourself in Joseph shoes, or sandals, as it were. As a husband, you've yet to bring your wife into your home to consummate the marriage, and you find out that she is pregnant! There is only one possible explanation in your mind – she has clearly been with another man.

What would you do if you discovered that the woman you love, the one you've chosen to marry, was pregnant right before you took her into your home?

Verse 19 gives us a glimpse into Joseph's thought here:

*Joseph, her fiancé, was a good man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly.*⁴

Joseph had a couple of options at this point. He could either go public and shame Mary, and have her stoned. But Joseph was not that kind of man. He was a gentle man. He was in love with Mary, and he did not want to hurt her in any way, although he believed that she had been unfaithful to him.⁵

Joseph's character was being tested.

Finally, We are tested to see our obedience.

When I was in high school, we got a Siberian Husky that we named Bandit. Bandit had spent his first 6 months of his life in a crate, so needless to say, once he had found freedom, he was full of energy. We decided my brother Greg would take Bandit to Obedience School. In the end, we weren't sure if it was Bandit or Greg who needed Obedience School more.

We don't know exactly what Joseph felt with the news from the angel, but I imagine he was puzzled. Nevertheless, Matthew gives us a great picture of Joseph's obedience in verses 24-25:

*When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife. But he did not have sexual relations with her until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus.*⁶

Joseph acted like Old Testament men and women of God who obeyed God's call even when it went against all human common sense. He obeyed without questioning God or laying down conditions. He didn't ask for another night's sleep to see if anything changed; he simply obeyed.

Today's key point is this: **Only God can turn a Test into a Testimony.**

Matthew tells us that all of these things happened amidst a fallen world. Jesus came to a world of sin in need of salvation. The problem of sin needed a divine solution.

And through the test of Joseph came a testimony, a testimony delivered from God, to people for all eternity. And what was that testimony?

⁴ Matthew 1:19 (NLT2)

⁵ Thru The Bible with J. Vernon McGee, Matthew 1:19

⁶ Matthew 1:24-25 (NLT2)

First, the Child's Name.

The angel told Joseph in verse 21:

*And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus,*⁷

The rabbis said that there were six whose names were given before birth: "Isaac, Ishmael, Moses, Solomon, Josiah, and the name of the Messiah, whom may the Holy One, blessed be His name, bring in our day."⁸

The name Jesus (in Aramaic, *Yēshūa* ; in Greek, *Iēsous*; in Hebrew, Jesus is the same as Joshua, a contraction of the Hebrew Jehoshuah) in Hebrew means "God is salvation" or "The Lord saves." Parents often intended the names they gave children to have some meaning, so if God gave a name, it had special significance. The Old Testament taught that God's people would be saved in the time of the Messiah⁹, and Jewish readers in the 1st century would have understood this salvation to mean more than just personal forgiveness. They prayed for the day when God would deliver His people from the consequences of their sins – from subjugation beneath their enemies; many believed that this deliverance would occur when their people as a whole reformed and turned wholeheartedly to God. Jesus came to deliver his people from personal sin and thus to deliver them from its judgment as well.¹⁰

So, the test that turned into testimony told us the Messiah's name: Jesus. In fact, His name is more important than anything. Verse 18 in the Greek, Jesus Christ comes before birth as the important matter. It literally says,

*And of Jesus Christ, the birth was thus...*¹¹

As Paul said in Philippians 2:

*Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor and gave him the name above all other names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*¹²

The test that turned into testimony told us the Messiah's name: Jesus.

Second, the Child's purpose.

The meaning of the Child's name also indicates His purpose. Look again at Matthew 1:21:

*And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.*¹³

It says, "from their sins." The Greek word for sins here is *hamartia*.¹⁴ It is an archery term – you know, as in bows and arrows – and it means "missing the mark." How often the best of us fall short and fail to hit the target set by God. Jesus will save us away from as well as out of our sins of omission and commission. They will be cast into oblivion and He will cover them up out of sight.¹⁵

Joseph's test would become testimony that the Child would be our Savior.

⁷ Matthew 1:21a (NLT2)

⁸ Word Pictures in the New Testament, Matthew 1:21

⁹ See Jeremiah 23:5-6

¹⁰ Bible Background Commentary, Matthew 1:21

¹¹ Matthew 1:18 (YLT)

¹² Philippians 2:9-11 (NLT2)

¹³ Matthew 1:21 (NLT2)

¹⁴ ἁμαρτία

¹⁵ Word Pictures in the New Testament, Matthew 1:21

Finally, the Child's assurance.

The prophet Isaiah had written hundreds of years before:

*"Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means 'God is with us.'"*¹⁶

Part of the purpose of the virgin birth of Jesus is to show us that salvation does not come from man, but from God. Salvation is wholly the work of a supernatural God, not the work of natural man. There is nothing we can do to save ourselves from our sins, which is evident even in the way in which Jesus entered the world. This baby born in Bethlehem was and is the center of all history.¹⁷

And once again, the birth of Jesus reminds us that God is with us. We see this over and over again, don't we, and I asked myself this week, "Why? Why does God keep reminding us that He is with us?" It is because we need to hear it. When there is a mess in our lives, we need to hear "God is with us." When there is a trial in our lives, we need to hear "God is with us." And when there is a test in our lives, we need to hear "God is with us."

You may be going through a test today, like Joseph did. Have you considered the possibility that this test is to be a testimony of Who the greatest person ever to be born is, of what He will do, and that He will always be with us? Have you considered that only God can take your test – be it cancer or COVID, divorce or death, sickness or sin – and turn it into a testimony of Who He is, what He can do for you?

The hardest test I have ever had to go through was watching my junior high sweetheart and wife of 17 ½ years waste away from cancer. The testimony was watching her glorious entrance into heaven.

Only God can turn a test into a testimony.

¹⁶ Matthew 1:23 (NLT2); from Isaiah 7:14; 8:8,10 in the Septuagint

¹⁷ Christ-Centered Exposition - Exalting Jesus in Matthew 1:18-25