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**Joseph and the Virgin Conception**  
**Matthew 1:18-25**

I don't know if it happened precisely this way, but I wouldn't be surprised if it did.

"Joseph," said Mary, "I need to talk to you."  
"Sure," he said. "Go ahead. Are you okay?"  
"Yes, I'm fine. But we need to talk in private."  
"Uh, O.K.," he said, somewhat concerned. "What is it?"

Joseph had grown in his ability to discern her moods, even though they hadn't known each other for very long and had only recently gotten engaged to be married. As he looked into her eyes he could tell she was a bit nervous. But at the same time, she was remarkably wide-eyed and morally calm, *without the slightest hint of guilt or shame*.

"I don't know how to say this," she began, "but I suppose the best thing would be for me to just come right out and say it."  
"You're not breaking up with me, are you?" asked Joseph, in a suddenly frightened voice.  
"Oh, no," said Mary. "Far from it. But after you hear what I've got to say, you may be the one who chooses to end our relationship."  
"I doubt that," Joseph replied. "But go ahead." His curiosity had obviously reached a tipping point.  
***"I'm pregnant. There, I said it."***

The word must have hit Joseph in the gut like a blow from a heavyweight boxer. He struggled to catch his breath. The feelings that suddenly rushed through his soul were a mixture of disbelief, shock, and confusion. His knees began to shake. He steadied himself and perhaps sat down on a large rock nearby. To say he was speechless is an understatement. Words simply did not come. He felt as if he had just entered the Twilight Zone!

He looked closely at Mary. He somewhat expected her to be drowning in tears, perhaps shaking in brokenness and guilt. But she stood firmly and without the slightest hint of repentance. Mary obviously sensed the need for some sort of explanation, so she spoke again:

"I know this must come as a complete shock to you. It came as a shock to me, too."

While she spoke, Joseph could only think of *what might have happened* to account for this. There's simply no way, he thought to himself, that Mary could have been unfaithful to me. That's one of the things I love so much about her: the integrity of her commitment to God and to me and to her family. She wasn't a flirt. She never gave the slightest hint that she struggled with sexual temptation. Her moral character was beyond reproach, or so he thought, up until that moment.

Perhaps it was rape, as Joseph continued to think through the possible scenarios. But surely she would have said something to her parents or to the religious authorities and to me. She interrupted his confused thought process with a simple declaration:

***"I haven't been unfaithful to you,"*** she said without the slightest hesitation. ***"I am still a virgin."***

If Joseph was at a loss for words before, now he was positively paralyzed. He said nothing to Mary, but spoke to his own soul: "Do you take me for an idiot? You're pregnant, but you're still a virgin. Right! And 2 + 2 equals 743!" Once again, Mary interrupted his thoughts:

"I know this sounds crazy. I know it makes no sense to you. I know you think I'm lying. But please listen carefully and let me explain."

Joseph had no intention of saying anything just yet. So he gestured for her to continue.

“I was just going about my business the other day. It seemed like any other day. Nothing had prepared me for what happened next. All of a sudden an angel appeared to me. I think it was Gabriel. He said: ‘Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!’ (Luke 1:28). Joseph, I can’t tell you how confusing that was. I kept asking myself why an angel would come to *me*. Why does he call *me* the ‘favored one’? What had I done to warrant this commendation? What does he mean when he says the ‘Lord is with’ me?”

Joseph didn’t say anything aloud but he was thinking the same thing. But the thought did race through his mind: “This is a first. A virgin, to whom I’m engaged, is pregnant and begins her explanation by telling me that the angel Gabriel shows up one day. Hmmm. This is going to be interesting!”

“Please, Joseph, just listen to me. This is precisely what he said:

‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end’ (Luke 1:30-33).”

“Joseph, I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I’m no dummy. I know enough about human biology to realize that what he said was crazy. So I asked the angel: ‘How will this be, since I am a virgin?’ (Luke 1:34).”

“Joseph, please don’t turn me away before you hear what Gabriel said next. He answered me, saying: ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy – the Son of God’ (Luke 1:35).”

“Joseph, he must have been reading my mind, because he then said: ‘For nothing will be impossible with God’ (Luke 1:37).”

“I felt paralyzed. I couldn’t move. But I knew what I was supposed to say and do. So I responded and said: ‘Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word’ (Luke 1:28). As soon as I said that, the angel disappeared as quickly as he had first shown up.”

“Oh, please, Joseph, say something. Anything. I do love you so. But the only thing I can conclude is that **God caused me to become pregnant**. Don’t ask me how. Gabriel said it would be a miracle, a work of the Holy Spirit himself.”

Joseph’s first thought must have been that Mary needed to speak cautiously. It was one thing to claim that she, a virgin, was pregnant. It was quite another to lay the blame on God. **Biological nonsense is one thing, but you shouldn’t add blasphemy to your list of sins.**

Neither I nor anyone else knows what Joseph said in response to Mary or what he did next. But I suspect that he took a long walk to clear his head. Maybe he spent more time with Mary, probing her with questions regarding the angelic visitation, rehearsing over and over again the precise words that Gabriel had spoken. Perhaps he spent his time trying to convince himself that she really was still a virgin and that she had not betrayed him and their commitment of betrothal.

I know what I would have been thinking, had I been Joseph. All my plans for the future have just come crashing down on my head. I had often dreamt of a large family with Mary, eventually even grandchildren to spoil. All that’s over with now.

We don’t have to speculate much, as Matthew tells us that Joseph was a “just” or “righteous” man and had no desire to expose Mary to open shame or any form of public humiliation. He had perhaps by now put out of his mind the possibility that Mary was telling him the truth and began to put plans together that would enable him to “divorce her quietly” (Matt. 1:19). After all, he still loved her very much.

He was exhausted, both emotionally and physically, but it took him a long time to fall asleep that night. And then something happened unlike anything he had ever experienced before. He had often had dreams, but none were as vivid and powerful as this one. An angel of the Lord appeared to him. Although in a dream state, he wondered to himself if this might be the same angel that appeared to Mary.

The angel spoke: ***“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. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins”*** (Matt. 1:20-21).

When Joseph heard those words he must have made an immediate connection with what Mary herself had reported to him regarding the statement by Gabriel. “He will be called the Son of the Most High” (Luke 1:32a). Not only that, but he will be the consummate fulfillment of all the promises made to King David in the Old Testament, for as Gabriel had made clear to her: “the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David” (Luke 1:32b).

Joseph’s mind must have been in a swirl. He thought deeply about what else Gabriel had said about this baby boy. When he becomes a man “he will reign over the house of Jacob forever” (Luke 1:33a). And if that were not enough to persuade Joseph of who this Jesus is and what he was to do, Gabriel’s next few words sealed it in his heart: “and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:33b).

Oh, my, Joseph must have thought. I get it now. Mary hasn’t been unfaithful. She is still a virgin, and I will make certain that she stays that way until we are officially married. But I can’t deny it any longer: this child in her womb is the long-awaited Messiah! This child is the Savior of the world! This child is the Son of God!

#### *What the Virgin Conception of Jesus does NOT Mean*

Now that you have what I hope is better insight into the dilemma Joseph faced and the courageous decision he made, let’s look at some of the details we find here in Matthew 1.

As you know, today we are rather flippant about marital engagements: they are made and broken on a whim. But in the world of Joseph and Mary engagement, or what they called ***betrothal***, was a serious and legally binding covenant that could be terminated only by a formal divorce. If someone was sexually unfaithful during the time of betrothal it was considered to be the same as adultery. That is why Joseph is described in v. 19 as ***“her husband.”*** This period of betrothal typically lasted a year and ended in marriage when the man ceremoniously took the bride home following a gala wedding feast.

It was during this time of betrothal that Mary was ***“found to be with child”*** (v. 18). The word “found” does not mean that Mary tried to conceal her pregnancy and simply got caught. It means that her pregnancy became obvious to others beside herself.

So what exactly had happened? ***What does the Bible mean when it speaks of the conception of Jesus in the womb of a virgin?***

You first need to understand that we are dealing with a miracle, but not your ordinary, run-of-the-mill miracle, if there even is such a thing! What I mean is that ***the virgin conception was not a demonstrable event. It was not the sort of miracle that was subject to empirical investigation and proof.*** The bodily resurrection of Jesus, on the other hand, could be empirically verified or refuted. Just produce the body and the miracle of the resurrection would be exposed as a fraud. But the virgin conception of Jesus does not stand upon historical testimony. You either believe it or not based on whether or not you believe in the inspiration and integrity of Holy Scripture.

Let me mention just a few other things about the virgin conception of Jesus.

***First, this is the not the “beginning-to-be” of the Son of God.*** God the Son, the second person of the Triune Godhead, is eternal and has always existed. Rather, this is the “beginning-to-be” of the incarnation of the Son of God and thus the “beginning-to-be” of the man Jesus.

**Second, the virgin conception does not undermine the full deity of Christ.** This is not the transformation of God into a human such that he is no longer God. God the Son did not cease to be God when he became a man.

**Third, contrary to what some have said, the virgin conception does not threaten the true humanity of Jesus.** Some have argued that since Jesus came into the world in a manner entirely different from every other human, he can't be genuinely and authentically human. But that argument simply doesn't hold up. Yes, Jesus is unique in the way he entered this world because he, unlike you and me, existed before he was born. But why should that be a threat to his humanity? Remember, we've already seen in Scripture three ways that a person can come into existence:

- (1) Adam came into being through neither a man nor a woman.
- (2) Eve came into being through a man without a woman.
- (3) You and I came into being through a man and a woman.
- (4) So why can't Jesus come into being through a woman without a man?

**Fourth, contrary to the teaching of Roman Catholicism, the virgin conception of Jesus does not mean we have to believe in the immaculate conception of Mary herself, or that she lived her life free from sin.** On December 8, 1854, Pope Pius IX declared that Mary was herself conceived in the womb of her mother without the taint or presence of original sin. Catholicism believes that this is the only way Mary herself could have given birth to a man who likewise was free from the taint of original sin.

“Through the centuries the Church has become ever more aware that Mary, ‘full of grace’ through God, was redeemed from the moment of her conception. That is what the dogma of the Immaculate Conception confesses, as Pope Pius IX proclaimed in 1854 – ‘The most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God and by virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Savior of the human race, preserved immune from all stain of original sin’ (*The Catholic Catechism*, 491).

“By the grace of God Mary remained free of every personal sin her whole life long” (*The Catholic Catechism*, 493).

But the Bible nowhere teaches or so much as hints at this. Also, in Luke 1:47 Mary sings these words: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God *my Savior*.” She regarded her son, Jesus, as her Savior. But if she was born free of original sin and did not commit sin during the course of her life, why would she need a Savior? Also, if in order for Jesus to be sinless Mary had to be sinless, then for Mary to be sinless her mother had to be born sinless, and for Jesus' grandmother to be sinless his great-grandmother had to be born sinless, and so on ad infinitum.

Finally, we know Mary was not free from original or personal sin because **she died!** Of course, the Roman Catholic Church has an answer for this one too. In 1950, Pope Pius XII declared as official RC dogma the notion of the bodily assumption of Mary:

“Finally the Immaculate Virgin, preserved free from all stain of original sin, when the course of her earthly life was finished, was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory, and exalted by the Lord as Queen over all things, so that she might be the more fully conformed to her Son, the Lord of lords and conqueror of sin and death. The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin is a singular participation in her Son's Resurrection and an anticipation of the resurrection of other Christians” (966).

Some in the RCC contend that Mary didn't die physically at all, but just before she was to expire God translated her into his presence. **But if Mary was free from all sin, why would she have been in jeopardy of dying in the first place?**

**Fifth, what we read here concerning the virgin conception of Jesus does not require that we believe in the perpetual virginity of Mary.** The doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary was proclaimed by the Council of Trent in 1545-63 and reaffirmed in the Catholic Catechism:

“The deepening of faith in the virginal motherhood led the Church to confess Mary’s real and perpetual virginity even in the act of giving birth to the Son of God made man. In fact, Christ’s birth ‘did not diminish his mother’s virginal integrity but sanctified it.’ And so the liturgy of the Church celebrates Mary as Aeiparthenos, the ‘Ever-virgin’” (499).

But look again at Matthew 1:25 and the obvious meaning of the word **“until”**! Also, in Luke 2:7 Jesus is described as her **“firstborn”** son. But if she remained a virgin throughout life, why not “only born” son? And what are we to make of Jesus’ brothers and sisters (Mark 3:31-35; 6:3; Luke 8:19-21; John 7:1-5; 1 Cor. 9:5; Gal. 1:19)? These were not his “cousins” as Rome contends, for there is a Greek word for “cousin” and it isn’t found in any of these texts. And even if Mary didn’t have other children, that doesn’t mean she remained a virgin all her life. I suspect that many of you here today were the only child of your parents. And remember that ***the perpetual virginity of Mary would require that we also believe in the perpetual virginity of Joseph!***

***So why was Jesus conceived and born of a virgin?*** First, to fulfill OT prophecy, as Matthew 1:22-23 makes clear. Second, and most important of all, so that the entry of God into human flesh, the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus might clearly be seen as the work of God alone. It was ***divine initiative***, not human, that accounts for the coming into this world of the Son of God. Man does nothing. Joseph did nothing. Mary did nothing. God did it all. It was all of grace!

*And what of Joseph?*

What can we know of this man? A document written in Egypt four hundred years after the birth of Jesus (*The History of Joseph the Carpenter*) claims, falsely of course, that Joseph was a widower with six children by his first marriage. He was considerably older than Mary when they wed and died at the age of 111. Jesus is said to have preached his funeral sermon!

But all we know from the gospels is that he quickly disappears from the narrative. He was alive when Jesus was 12 (see Luke 2), but most likely had died soon thereafter, or at least prior to the time of Christ’s crucifixion (Jesus commits Mary to the apostle John for care; an unlikely thing if Joseph were still alive).

He was a remarkably righteous and honorable man and wrestled with what to do about the situation before the angel told him what had actually happened. The Mosaic Law said that Mary should be stoned to death (Deut. 22:23-24), but by the first century this was rarely if ever carried out. A public divorce would have exposed her to humiliation so he chose the path of private divorce in the presence of two witnesses. Joseph is an example to all men of how we are to protect and guard the women for whom we are responsible.

*Joseph’s Dream (vv. 20-23)*

The angel that appears to him in a dream tells him the same three things that Mary was told: (1) Mary’s pregnancy is not the result of infidelity but is of divine and supernatural origin; (2) he is to name the boy, Jesus, because of what he has been sent to accomplish; and (3) his birth is in fulfillment of OT prophecy.

*Two Names (vv. 23-25)*

The newborn child is given two names. First, he is to be called **“Jesus”**. Throughout history men have been given names supposedly reflecting their character and accomplishments: Alexander the Great, Charles the Bold, Richard the Lionhearted. Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew “Joshua” which means “Yahweh is salvation” or simply “Yahweh saves”!

Sadly, many have tampered with the meaning of the name “Jesus” by suggesting he came to do something other than save his people from their sins. Next week we will look more closely at the meaning of this name and precisely what “salvation” entails. For now, let it be said that he did not come to tell people how to save themselves or to tell them where or to whom they might go to experience salvation. He came to save. He alone can save. He did not come to save us from educational ignorance or from poverty or from political oppression or from our psychological problems, but from our sins. Of course, he will consummate our salvation by accomplishing all forms of

deliverance, but his primary aim was to deliver us from divine judgment. Jesus is, and did, precisely what his name means: he has saved us from our sins!

His other name is "***Immanuel***" or God with us. Does this mean that Jesus is God's way of being present in our midst? Perhaps Jesus is not himself God, but simply the agent or instrument through which God mediates his presence among us. No! ***Jesus is God with us because Jesus is God! He is not merely the agency of God's presence: he is God present! He is not merely God's ambassador. He is God!***

*Joseph's Obedience (vv. 24-25)*

In the NT, Joseph never speaks. He never says a word. He only acts. He only obeys. He overcomes whatever initial hesitation he felt to take Mary as his wife. He is later told to flee into Egypt to protect Jesus, and he again obeys. He is instructed to return following Herod's death, and he obeys. In every scene he is silent. His hallmark is obedience: prompt, simple, and quiet.

Thanks be to God for Mary's willingness to bear the child, even though she would be accused of sexual immorality and her son would be charged with being illegitimate. Thanks be to God for Joseph's integrity and obedience and love not only for his God but also for Mary. But most of all, thanks be to our great Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For it was the Father who sent the Son, the Son who willingly came and humbled himself even to death on a cross, and the Holy Spirit who worked a miracle in Mary's womb and empowered Jesus throughout his earthly life. The virgin conception, so we see, is all about God and his grace in saving human souls.