

# ***FPFWC Christian Development***



## **The Beginning of the Call**

December 2020

Winter Quarter

**December 12, 2020**

**Lesson #2 – Called to Be Emmanuel**

SCRIPTURE TEXT – Matthew 1:18-25

**ICE BREAKER –**

1. What procedure should Christians use to determine the Lord's will when faced with a decision having life long impact?
2. How does Joseph's obedience serve as an example and challenge to you?

***Key Verse: Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.—Matthew 1:20b–21***

**LESSON BACKGROUND**

Today's lesson focuses on the unlikely hero Joseph of Nazareth. Joseph's background was unremarkable in a number of ways. First, his place of residence, Nazareth (Luke 2:4; 4:16, 22), was a tiny village well off the beaten path. In Joseph's day the town was so insignificant that it is not mentioned in contemporary sources outside the Bible. Even the first-century Jewish historian Josephus didn't include Nazareth in his list of Galilean villages subdued by the Romans during the great Jewish revolt of AD 66–72. The majority of the inhabitants of Nazareth would have worked as subsistence farmers or day laborers, living the peasant lifestyle typical of Rome's occupied provinces (compare John 1:46).

Second, even within Nazareth, Joseph's social standing would have been nothing special. In Matthew 13:55, its residents were dismissive of the adult Jesus, calling Him "the carpenter's son"—a reference that reveals Joseph's trade. The Greek word often translated "carpenter" could refer to a skilled woodworker, boutique craftsman, or construction worker.

In the first century AD, Galilean laborers like Joseph were employed on major construction projects funded by the Roman client-king Herod Antipas, where they worked with stone, wood, and other materials to build roads and public buildings. Joseph may have spent most of his life working on the new and elegant Roman colony at Sepphoris, a three-mile walk north from Nazareth.

Life was hard for poor laborers in that era, a fact that may explain why Joseph apparently did not live to see Jesus' ministry. While he is mentioned as the father of the adult Jesus in John 6:42, he last appears in the Gospels in Luke 2:41–50, a story that took place when Jesus was 12 years old.

In ancient times, tradespeople like Joseph were not protected by labor laws or collective-bargaining contracts. As a result, they were subject to long workdays, dangerous conditions, and the typically high levels of taxation that Rome levied on its subjects. It is highly unlikely that Joseph had received any kind of formal

education, and almost certain that he could not read or write with any level of proficiency. Were it not for his association with Jesus, Joseph would have been lost to the pages of history.

But despite his humble origins, Joseph stood out among his peers in at least two respects. First, Joseph was a descendant of King David (see Matthew 1:1–16; lesson 1), and thus a member of Israel’s royal line. This fact explains why Joseph took his pregnant wife from Galilee to Bethlehem (a Judean village about six miles from Jerusalem) to register for the Roman tax census (Matthew 2:1; Luke 2:1–4). Bethlehem was David’s hometown (1 Samuel 16:1). David was widely understood to be the ancestor of the coming Messiah, who would rule Israel on David’s restored throne (2 Samuel 7; Jeremiah 23:5–6).

The second way Joseph stood out among his peers is part of today’s lesson.

## **LESSON COMMENTARY**

**1:18–21.** Jewish marriage practices had the groom taking the initiative in approaching the father of the prospective bride. If the bride’s father agreed to the marriage, the groom paid a price called a *mohar*, a sort of reverse dowry that compensated the bride’s family for any financial loss they might incur without her help in the family business. The couple exchanged vows and was considered legally married. Dissolution of the marriage during betrothal required formal divorce. The couple did not cohabit for a year while the groom prepared living quarters, often attached to his father’s house. After the year the groom and his friends would surprise the bride and her family, the wedding feast would begin, further vows would be exchanged, and the marriage consummated. It was during the year of betrothal that Mary’s pregnancy was discovered. Marriage would have been a tacit admission by Joseph that the child was his, possibly something intolerable to this **righteous man**. But he was kind as well, and intended to divorce her **secretly** by writing a bill of divorcement in the presence of two or three witnesses rather than suing Mary and her family to recoup the *mohar* and to make a case for his innocence. It required angelic intervention to change Joseph’s mind.

**1:22–23.** How Matthew views the connection between Is 7:14 and the birth of Jesus is debated. Possibly Isaiah’s words were fulfilled in the eighth century BC, with Jesus not so much “fulfilling” Isaiah, but Matthew “filling Isaiah full” of new meaning. Another view is that Isaiah’s prophecy had multiple fulfillments—one in the day of Ahaz and one in Jesus’ day. The preferable understanding is to see the prophecy as a direct prediction with an unvarnished fulfillment in the virgin birth. The meaning of **VIRGIN** (Gk. *parthenos* in Matthew and in the LXX at Is 7:14; *almah* in Hb.) is debated. *Almah* usually means “a young woman who is not sexually active” (Gn 24:43; Ex 2:8; possibly Ps 68:25 [ET; MT and LXX, 67:26]; Sg 1:3; 6:8; probably Pr 30:19). *Parthenos* meant “a young woman,” usually one who is presumed to be sexually inexperienced (though see LXX Gn 34:3, where it probably means simply “girl”). Only in Gn 24:43 and Is 7:14 does *parthenos* translate *almah*, and in Gn 24:43 it designates a young woman with no sexual experience. The one(s) who translated Isaiah into Greek for the LXX had other

words available for “young woman of marriageable age who is having or who is about to have sexual relations” (e.g., *neanis* which could mean “maiden” or “young married woman,” or *kore*, “bride,” “young wife,” “concubine”), and apparently understood *almah* in Is 7 as referring to sexual inexperience. This weighs against the understanding that Isaiah was referring to his own or another’s wife on the verge of conception.

The structure of the words addressed to Judah (Is 7:1–9:7) and Israel (Is 9:8–11:16) are parallel, and contain the following features: the parallels mean that Is 7:1–9:7 should be read as a unit, and indicates that the promised Immanuel (Is 7:14) will possess the land (Is 8:8), defeat all enemies (8:10), and appear in Galilee as a light to the Gentiles (Is 9:1–2; see Mt 4:15–16), and will be seen as divine, ruling forever on David’s throne (Is 9:6–7). Matthew saw these themes directly fulfilled in the birth of Jesus (for the details, see D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” In *Matthew, Mark, Luke* of EBC, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984], 78–81).

**1:24–25.** Joseph complied with the angel’s message and married Mary, apparently without any wedding celebration. To safeguard the integrity of the virgin birth, Joseph **kept** Mary a **virgin** until after the birth. While Mary is commendable for her role in Jesus’ birth, Joseph is similarly impressive. He was ethically upright, compassionate toward the woman he intended to divorce, and was in control of his libido enough to abstain from relations until after the birth. Joseph is the forgotten hero of Christmas!

**LESSON NUGGET** – The birth of Jesus was different from every other birth: He was conceived by the spirit in Mary’s womb and born with a sinless nature. He is “God with us,” and He is also God like us because He took our nature and entered into human life and experience. What a wonderful Savior!

**Sources:** *Moody Bible Commentary, Standard Lesson Commentary, and The Essential Everyday Bible Commentary*