# Christmas Lesson

## Good Questions Have Small Groups Talking [www.joshhunt.com](http://www.joshhunt.com)

### Matthew 1:18 - 25

### OPEN

Let’s each share your name and what you are doing for Christmas this year.

### DIG

1. Today’s passage teaches on the Virgin Birth. Why is the virgin birth so theologically important?

Why is the virgin birth important to the Christian faith? Jesus Christ, God’s Son, had to be free from the sinful nature passed on to all other human beings by Adam. Because Jesus was born of a woman, he was a human being; but as the Son of God, Jesus was born without any trace of human sin. Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. The infinite, unlimited God took on the limitations of humanity so he could live and die for the salvation of all who believe in him.

Because Jesus lived as a man, we know that he fully understands our experiences and struggles (Hebrews 4:15-16). Because he is God, he has the power and authority to deliver us from sin (Colossians 2:13-15). We can tell Jesus all our thoughts, feelings, and needs. He has been where we are now, and he has the ability to help. — *Life Application Bible Commentary – Matthew.*

1. A lot of people doubt the virgin birth. Do you know who the first person to doubt the virgin birth was?

And Joseph, initially not all that sure himself about the “virgin birth,” was originally thinking divorce, albeit quietly and with no public scandal. But when Joseph was approached by God through the angel, he accepted his role and did precisely as he was instructed by God. He kept Mary a virgin until after Jesus was born, after which their normal marital relations produced other children who were the half-brothers of Jesus. And Joseph, as the legal heir to the throne, named their son “Jesus” as he was told. Mary and Joseph learned that the only way to follow God was to “trust and obey” his word. The character of these two young adults reminds us that God fulfills his purposes by using people of strong character and unquestioning obedience. — *Holman New Testament Commentary – Matthew.*

1. How does the Virgin birth help us to understand the rest of Jesus’ life?

We know intuitively that Matthew’s interest in the identity of Jesus is right. We know that all hope of making sense of events rests on a knowledge of the characters. This is true of the birth of Jesus as it is true for any striking event.

One Saturday I headed off for a doubles tennis match against the best team in the league. I arrived hoping for an upset, and those hopes surged as I began to warm up with one of our opponents. He was a big, hard-hitting lefty, but he looked erratic and slow-footed. Much hinged on his partner, who had not arrived. The minutes ticked away and the time for a forfeit approached when Lefty asked a club pro to find someone to fill in. The pro returned with a slender man named Altof, who moved like a leopard and held his racket in a faintly menacing way. I began to hit with Altof. In league play, men warm up watchfully, trying to judge their opponents’ skills and deficiencies. As I watched Altof, I saw all skill and no deficiencies. His strokes were effortless, his footwork flawless. Every ball he struck came in deep and hard. I leaned over and told my partner, “We need to hit to your man; mine looks very solid.”

We tried to hit everything to Lefty, and it worked well enough that the score was tied 4-4 after eight games. Then, suddenly Altof was everywhere, crushing the ball for winner after winner; we lost the first set, 6-4. Before the second set began, I heard Altof whisper to Lefty, “I need to finish soon.” I told my partner, “If we lose the second set in fifteen minutes, we’ll know something is up.” Indeed, we lost 6-1 in 14 minutes, with Altof covering the entire court, punishing us in point after point. As we shook hands at the net, I said, “That was impressive. Now tell me who you are.”

“Well,” he confessed, “I’m a pro here, just filling in so you could have a match.”

“Oh, I figured that out a while ago,” I smiled. “I want to know: who are you?!”

“OK,” he said, “I’ll tell you. I was a touring pro till a year ago; I played for India’s Davis Cup team.” He had been one of the top 200 players in the world. Now that I knew who he was, I could make sense of our match.

The gospel of Matthew operates on this very principle. Events make sense if and only if we know who the characters are. Matthew 1 certainly describes some very unusual events. There is a virgin who is pregnant by the agency of the Holy Spirit. An angel appears to prevent a young man from setting aside an unwed mother. Later, an angel picks the name of that child and declares that he will be the Savior.

It’s an incomprehensible story, unless you know the characters. So, then, who is this child? It’s a good question; people ask it over and over in the Gospels:

* A storm threatens to swamp a boat and drown everyone on board. Jesus stands up and rebukes the wind and the waves, and they stop at once. His disciples see this and ask, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!” (Mark 4:41; cf. Matt. 8:27).
* He forgives sins and they ask, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” (Luke 7:49).
* He enters Jerusalem attended by a crowd that lays cloaks and palm branches on the road before him. They call out, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” and the city asks, “Who is this?” (Matt. 21:9–10).
* At his trial before the Sanhedrin, the high priest of the Jews says, “Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.” The Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate, asks, “Are you the king of the Jews?” (Matt. 26:63; 27:11). — Daniel M. Doriani, Philip Graham Ryken, and Richard D. Phillips, The Incarnation in the Gospels, ed. Daniel M. Doriani, Philip Graham Ryken, and Richard D. Phillips, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 5–7.

1. For this to be such an important doctrine, Matthew doesn’t spend much time talking about it. Why do you think this is?

Matthew needs only one verse (1:18) to announce the fact of Christ’s virgin birth. Such a concise statement, though it doesn’t all by itself prove the point, strongly suggests that the notion of our Lord and Savior’s virgin birth was not simply a man-made story. A human author, writing strictly on his own initiative, would characteristically tend to describe such a momentous and amazing event in an expansive, detailed, and elaborate manner. But not the apostle Matthew. He does relate additional circumstances surrounding the virgin birth, but the basic fact is stated in one simple sentence: “After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit.”

Matthew devotes the previous seventeen verses to Jesus’ human genealogy but just this part of one verse to His divine genealogy. As the Son of God, Jesus “descended” from His heavenly Father by a miraculous and never-repeated act of the Holy Spirit; even so, the Holy Spirit chose to announce that astounding truth by just one brief, declarative sentence. As all God’s Word does, Matthew’s simple statement contains the solemn tone of authenticity. By contrast, a human fabrication would tend to have that false ring of exaggeration to it, being filled out with much more “convincing” material than what this inspired version needed. — John F. MacArthur Jr., *God in the Manger: The Miraculous Birth of Christ* (Nashville, TN: W Pub. Group, 2001), 4–5.

1. Matthew 1.18. How does your translation have this? What was the relationship between Mary and Joseph?

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Matthew 1:18 (NIV)

These are the facts concerning the birth of Jesus Christ: His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But while she was still a virgin she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Matthew 1:18 (TLB)

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. 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 1:18 (ESV)

This is how Jesus Christ was born. A young woman named Mary was engaged to Joseph from King David’s family. But before they were married, she learned that she was going to have a baby by God’s Holy Spirit. Matthew 1:18 (CEV)

1. So, what exactly was a betrothal?

Modern readers need to understand the traditions involved in ancient Jewish marriages. First, the two families would agree to the union and negotiate the betrothal. Next, a public announcement would be made and the couple was “pledged.” Though the couple was not officially married, their relationship could be broken only through death or divorce. Sexual relations were not yet permitted. This second step lasted for a year. During that time, the couple would live separately, with their parents. This waiting period would demonstrate the bride’s purity. If she were found to be pregnant during that time, the marriage could be annulled. — Bruce Barton et al., *Life Application New Testament Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 2001), 11.

1. How is Joseph described?

With the phrase “a just man,” Matthew recognizes the status of Joseph. He was a tsadiq (tsa-DEEK), a serious student of the Torah. Nazareth viewed Joseph as we might view an elder, deacon, or Bible class teacher. Tsadiqs studied God’s law. They recited and lived the Shema daily. They supported the synagogue, observed holy days, and followed the food restrictions. For a common carpenter to be known as a tsadiq was no small thing. Joseph likely took pride in his standing, but Mary’s announcement jeopardized it. I’m pregnant. — Max Lucado, *Cure for the Common Life: Living in Your Sweet Spot* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2005), 84–85.

1. What else do we know about Joseph?

We know nothing else of Joseph’s life except his taking the infant Jesus to the Temple for dedication (Luke 2:22-33), his taking Mary and Jesus into Egypt to protect Him from Herod’s bloody edict and the return (Matt. 2:13-23), and his taking his family to the Passover in Jerusalem when Jesus was twelve (Luke 2:42-52). We have no idea when Joseph died, but it could have been well before Jesus began His public ministry. Obviously it was before Jesus’ crucifixion, because from the cross Jesus gave his mother into the care of John (John 19:26). — *The - MacArthur New Testament Commentary – Matthew 1-7.*

1. What do we know about Mary?

Scripture gives us little information about Mary and even less about Joseph. Mary was undoubtedly a godly young woman, probably a native of Nazareth who came from a relatively poor family. Joseph was the son of Jacob (Matt. 1:16) and was a craftsman, probably a carpenter (13:55). Most significant, he was a “just man” (1:19), one who placed saving trust in the coming Messiah.

Most likely Mary and Joseph were both quite young when they were engaged (“betrothed”). She may have been as young as twelve or thirteen, and he not any older than fifteen or sixteen. Such youthfulness at the time of a couple’s engagement was standard for that culture. Another standard aspect of the Jewish betrothal was its binding nature—society considered the man and the woman legally married even though the formal ceremony and consummation might occur a year later. The purpose of the engagement period was to confirm each partner’s fidelity when the two had little or no social contact with each another. — John F. MacArthur Jr., *God in the Manger: The Miraculous Birth of Christ* (Nashville, TN: W Pub. Group, 2001), 5.

1. How did following God complicate Joseph and Mary’s life?

Initial news of Mary’s condition presented Joseph with a twofold problem. A caring and responsible person concerned about doing the right thing, Joseph was unwilling to proceed with his original plans once he perceived that a crucial part of those plans was no longer acceptable. His difficulty was intensified by the reality that he was a righteous man, genuinely concerned about doing what was morally and ethically right according to God’s Law. First, when Joseph realized Mary was pregnant, he knew he could not go ahead with their marriage. He knew he was not the father and, based on what he knew at the time, he had to assume that another man was.

Joseph’s second difficult decision concerned how he should then treat Mary. Because he was a good and loving man, he was grieved at the thought of shaming her publicly (a common practice in those days when a wife was unfaithful), and even more so at the prospect of demanding her death, as provided for in Deuteronomy 22:23–24. We don’t know if he felt anger, resentment, or bitterness, but he certainly experienced shame at what he had to assume was true. However, Joseph’s concern was not primarily with his own shame and embarrassment, but with Mary’s. Matthew 1:19 says, “not wanting to make her a public example, [Joseph] was minded to put her away secretly.”

Therefore, Joseph’s plan was to divorce Mary secretly so she would not have to endure the disgrace of everyone in the community knowing about her supposed sin. Not many husbands ever display such firmly held and deeply felt love for their wives. Of course eventually, when the marriage didn’t occur, everyone would have found out that something had gone wrong. But at least in the meantime Mary would be protected from humiliation and death.

The Lord, however, in His sovereign providence and wonderful grace, intervened directly into the situation and spared Joseph the further trauma of actually carrying out his divorce plans. “But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit’” (Matt. 1:20). This verse underscores the miraculous nature of the virgin birth and the supernatural character surrounding the entire event of Christ’s birth. It also provides divine assurance to Joseph (“son of David”) and to us that Jesus had legitimate royal lineage that legally came through Joseph as a descendant of King David.

The angel’s words provide the ultimate and most irrefutable testimony to the essential truth of the virgin birth and to the proper response Joseph was to have to Mary’s extraordinary situation. — John F. MacArthur Jr., *God in the Manger: The Miraculous Birth of Christ* (Nashville, TN: W Pub. Group, 2001), 7–8.

1. How is Joseph feeling in the beginning of verse 20?

Incognizant of the reason for Mary’s condition and drawing the natural conclusion, namely, that Mary had been unfaithful to him, Joseph could not see his way clear to take Mary home with him and live with her in the usual marriage relationship. Had she not broken her solemn pledge? Joseph must have agonized about the proper thing to do under these circumstances. He loved Mary and wanted to have her with him as his wife, but, above all, he was a righteous person (cf. Job 1:8; Luke 1:6), a man of principle, one who with his whole heart wanted to live in accordance with the will of God, the God who took so very seriously the breaking of the marriage vow. However, Joseph was also kindhearted. According to the custom of the day, two avenues were open to him: a. institute a lawsuit against Mary, and b. hand her a bill of divorcement, thus dismissing her quietly, that is, without involving her in any juridical procedure (see Deut. 24:1, 3 and Matt. 5:32). The former alternative, though in practice it would no longer have meant death by stoning, for this law had been modified by so many man-made restrictions that this possibility could be safely dismissed, would nevertheless have exposed Mary to public disgrace and scorn, the very thing which Joseph wanted by all means to avoid. Consequently, he decided upon the latter alternative, namely, to send her away quietly, though even this was not at all agreeable with his strong inner yearning for her, as is clear from verse 20. But as he was mulling this over, what happened? An angel of the Lord appeared to him during a dream and said, Joseph, son of David, do not hesitate to take Mary, your wife, into your home, for what was conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. — *Baker New Testament Commentary – Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew.*

1. Why the delay for this angel to come to Joseph?

The Lord let Joseph struggle to solve his problem for a season before he revealed a better plan. He often does this, letting us make our plans, then revealing a better way. When this happens, we must change our plans, as Joseph did. We must test our plans and purposes against God’s will, as revealed in Scripture and in the counsel of the wise. Even plans that look sound must be open to revision. — Daniel M. Doriani, Philip Graham Ryken, and Richard D. Phillips, *The Incarnation in the Gospels, ed. Daniel M. Doriani, Philip Graham Ryken, and Richard D. Phillips, Reformed Expository Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 25.

1. What did Joseph’s righteousness drive him to do?

It drove him to care about Mary’s feelings and reputation. Righteous people care about people.

1. What did it cost Joseph to follow God?

Matthew describes Jesus’ earthly father as a craftsman (Matthew 13:55). A small-town carpenter, he lives in Nazareth: a single-camel map dot on the edge of boredom. Is he the right choice? Doesn’t God have better options? An eloquent priest from Jerusalem or a scholar from the Pharisees?

Why Joseph? A major part of the answer lies in his reputation: he gives it up for Jesus. “Then Joseph [Mary’s] husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly” (Matthew 1:19).

With the phrase “a just man,” Matthew recognizes the status of Joseph. Nazareth viewed him as we might view an elder, deacon, or Bible class teacher. Joseph likely took pride in his standing, but Mary’s announcement jeopardized it. I’m pregnant.

Now what? His fiancée is blemished, tainted . . . he is righteous, godly. On the one hand, he has the law. On the other hand, he has his love. The law says, stone her. Love says, forgive her. Joseph is caught in the middle.

Then comes the angel. Mary’s growing belly gives no cause for concern, but reason to rejoice. “She carries the Son of God in her womb,” the angel announces. But who would believe it?

A bead of sweat forms beneath Joseph’s beard. He faces a dilemma. Make up a lie and preserve his place in the community, or tell the truth and kiss his reputation good-bye. He makes his decision. “Joseph . . . took to him his wife, and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son” (Matthew 1:24–25).

Joseph swapped his Torah studies for a pregnant fiancée and an illegitimate son and made the big decision of discipleship. He placed God’s plan ahead of his own. — Max Lucado, *In the Manger: 25 Inspirational Selections for Advent* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012).

1. Verse 21. What does the name *Jesus* mean?

The name Jesus chosen by God for his Son (1:21) was, in that day and for centuries before, a common name with special meaning. Jesus is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew Joshua, meaning “Yahweh is salvation.”

Jewish boys for centuries had been given this name Jesus with the frequency of today’s John or Mike. This reflects, in part, the hope of Jewish parents for God’s salvation from centuries of oppression under a succession of world powers. God’s choice of such a common name, when he could have chosen something unique, also emphasized that Jesus came in a way that identified with “the average Joe.” He came in love to become one of us, that we might be drawn to him and become one of his. Jesus was approachable and touchable. He was one of us. “We do not have a high Priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses” (Heb. 4:15). Jesus did everything to build bridges to us.

Yet, while the name Jesus was common, only this child was qualified as the God-Man to save his people from their sins (1:21). Jesus came at the strategically appointed time to seal the eternal salvation of all whom the Father had chosen. — *Holman New Testament Commentary – Matthew.*

1. What does Jesus save us from? What does He NOT save us from?

But the angel declares God’s agenda. Jesus will not save his people from physical enemies; he “will save his people from their sins.” Sin is the root of all other calamities. Yes, calamity comes from many sources—accidents, forgetfulness, and disease, for example. But the root, the cause, of disorder is sin, and the greatest disorder is to be at odds with God. Jesus will save his people from that. — Daniel M. Doriani, Philip Graham Ryken, and Richard D. Phillips, *The Incarnation in the Gospels*, ed. Daniel M. Doriani, Philip Graham Ryken, and Richard D. Phillips*, Reformed Expository Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 26.

1. Verse 23. What does Immanuel mean?

God is never so clearly present with his people as he is through his virgin-born Son, the Messiah of Israel. Jesus is Immanuel! The linguistic components of the name Immanuel and their individual translations—Im = “with,” anu = “us,” and el = “God”—make it clear that Isaiah’s original prophecy could refer in its fullest sense only to the promised Messiah. This name of Jesus is a strong argument for his deity. — *Holman New Testament Commentary – Matthew.*

1. What difference does Immanuel make in our day to day lives?

The name “Immanuel” appears twice in the Hebrew Scriptures and once in the New Testament. In Greek, it is rendered “Emmanouel.” One of the most comforting of all the names and titles of Jesus, it is literally translated “with us is God” or, as Matthew’s Gospel puts it, “God with us.” When our sins made it impossible for us to come to him, God took the outrageous step of coming to us, of making himself susceptible to sorrow, familiar with temptation, and vulnerable to sin’s disruptive power, in order to cancel its claim. In Jesus we see how extreme God’s love is. Remember this the next time you feel discouraged, abandoned, or too timid to undertake some new endeavor. For Jesus is still Immanuel — he is still “God with us.” — Ann Spangler, *Immanuel: A Daily Guide to Reclaiming the True Meaning of Christmas* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009).

1. Catholics teach the perpetual virginity of Mary. What does verse 25 say?

Verse 25 is evidence enough that Mary did not remain a perpetual virgin. We learn from Matthew 12:46-50 and 13:55-56 that a number of naturally born sons and daughters were added to the family. The Roman Catholic edifice built around “the blessed virgin Mary” is founded on a falsehood. Mary, the Lord’s mother, did not remain a virgin; she and Joseph entered into a normal husband-wife relationship after the miraculous birth of the Son of God. — *John Phillips Commentary Series, The - The John Phillips Commentary Series – Exploring the Gospel of Matthew: An Expository Commentary.*

1. We always want to read the Bible for application. What is the meaning of this story for us?

For Christmas to have meaning, it cannot be separated from the Cross. The angel said at the birth of Jesus, “He shall save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21 KJV). Jesus Himself said, speaking of His death, “To this end was I born” (John 18:37 KJV). He was the only person that’s ever been born in history who was born with the purpose of dying. The apostle Paul years later said, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.”

The central message of Christmas is that Jesus Christ, by His death and resurrection, can transform both individuals and society. Almost everyone at some time or another feels moral guilt and failure. It’s like the little boy who said, “I guess I was born wrong.” In every newspaper or magazine that we pick up, and in every newscast that we watch, we see a picture of hate and lust and greed and prejudice and corruption manifested in a thousand ways. And the fact that we have policemen and jails and military forces indicates that something is wrong with the human race, something’s radically wrong with human nature. — Billy Graham, *The Cradle, Cross, and Crown* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2014).

1. What do you want to recall from today’s conversation?
2. How can we support one another in prayer this week?