

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.¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

²⁰ But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:²³ “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, “God with us.”

²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.²⁵ But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus. (Matthew 1:18-25)

Jesus is the Gift that Brightens Every Season

How bright is your Christmas season this year? We all want to have a story book Christmas, don't we? We'd all love our Christmas to be the kind of celebration that someone might make into a made for TV Christmas special – something with a little bit of magic, a little Christmas miracle and then love and fellowship come through and we all remember what is most important to us. But you know what? There's a reason those things are made for TV specials: they don't really happen like that. There is just as much truth in the other Christmas season entertainment standby – the miserable Christmas that everyone wants to forget. Most of us come into this Christmas season with our share of difficulties and worries. Sadly, the story book Christmas ideal sometimes does more to underline what's wrong with our lives than what's right. All those false expectations can actually cause us to miss out on what's really important this year. They can even turn our mood dark and grim. But there is a solution. It's the heart of the Christmas message: Jesus. On Christmas, God the Father gave his Son to the world. **Jesus is the gift that brightens every season.**

I.

Of course, God first gave that gift more than two thousand years ago in the little town of Bethlehem to Joseph and Mary. This evening, we're going to focus especially on Joseph and his experience, because Matthew tells us, **“This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about.”** Joseph clearly had things on his mind on that first Christmas. His thoughts had to be dark and depressed. But **Jesus is the gift that brightens every season. He brightened Joseph's season.**

Why did Joseph need that? Well, you heard what was happening, right? Joseph and Mary were engaged but they weren't married yet. And Mary turned up pregnant. Joseph knew that he had nothing to do with that and he drew the logical conclusion. That would break anybody's heart. Matthew says that Joseph was a righteous man. He didn't want to publicly humiliate Mary. If you think about the feelings that people would ordinarily have at a moment like this, that says a lot about his character. Even though this had to hurt and sadden him, Joseph still wanted to protect Mary. He just wanted to quietly end it all.

But then God brightened his outlook. God sent an angel to tell him what was really going on. Now the angel came in a dream. That doesn't mean that all our dreams mean something. But when God sends a message in a dream, he makes it clear that this is a communication from him. The angel told Joseph, **“Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”** Joseph's fiancé wasn't sleeping around. God had done something that had never happened before and would never happen again. The Holy Spirit did a miracle in her womb and caused her to conceive. That was great news for Joseph. But the next sentence was even greater. The angel said, **“She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”** There was a reason that God had turned Joseph's plans upside down: Jesus was coming. Jesus means, “The Lord saves.” Joseph was to give his son that name because that's exactly what Jesus was going to do: save his people from their sins.

Joseph understood that God was doing something more important than the life he and Mary had been planning together. God was sending a Savior for the world. God was giving a gift that would brighten the lives of untold millions of people for at least two thousand years to come. Joseph could see the big picture because he could see the little picture, too. God was doing this for him. We like to think of guys like Joseph as saints. And Matthew did say that he was righteous man. But that does not mean he was a perfect man. That's what we often mean by a saint. We think of someone who devotes their life to helping the poor or to taking care of the sick without asking for anything in return. And somewhere in the back of our minds is the idea that those things they do make them better than the rest of us. We tend to believe that God would never punish a person like that, a person like Joseph who was so selfless in his treatment of Mary. What could he possibly punish him for?

But that's where Joseph knew better than we do. He knew that he was a sinner. The world is full of people who make a show of being religious, but they look down on people who seem to be less saint-like than they are. Joseph was not like that. Why not? There's only one reason: he knew that he was a sinner, too. Only a person who understands that no matter how hard he tries and how sincere he is, he is still a sinner is humble enough to want to show mercy to another sinner. Pride is what makes us judgmental. Joseph was humble because he understood that just like you and me, he needed a Savior. He needed someone to take away his sins. When he heard that Mary's child would be that Savior, all the sadness and all the gloom that he was feeling over his marital disaster evaporated. Joseph did as God commanded. He married Mary.

II.

Joseph had a very personal interest in the first Christmas. Learning that Mary had been faithful would unquestionably brighten his celebration. The issues that cloud our celebration, the false hopes and impossible expectations that we bring to this season, the frustrations and family problems that keep our lives from being storybook celebrations of this holiday are quite different from his. They won't be solved by learning that our fiancé is carrying the Christ child. But there is a parallel here that does apply to each of us. God wasn't just giving this gift to Joseph or to Mary or even to the people of Bethlehem. God was giving the Savior to you and to me. **Jesus is the gift that brightens every season. He brightens our season.**

God made a promise to the world – you heard it this evening in the very first lesson that I read to you. In the Garden of Eden, God promised to send the Seed of the Woman to crush the devil's head. In that promise, the serpent, the devil, would strike his heel. You know what happens when a poisonous snake strikes somebody, right? They die. In the very beginning God promised to send a Savior who would free us from the devil and who would die in the process. He repeated that promise over and over again. He added details: the Virgin Birth, the Child whose name is the Mighty God, the Ruler from the Town of Bethlehem, and many, many more. Joseph and the Mary were the first people to receive the fulfillment of that promise, but they were far from the last. We are part of that fulfillment. God has given this gift to you and to me and to the entire world. The baby that was born in Bethlehem is our Savior.

The angel told Joseph that the Holy Spirit did this miracle in Mary's womb. Now, how clearly Joseph understood all that implied, I can't say. But you and I can look back on this event knowing the rest of what God tells us in the Scriptures. We know what this same angel said to Mary: the Holy Spirit would come upon her and the power of the Most High would overshadow her so that the holy one to be born would be called the Son of God. Lest you misunderstand what that means, when the Bible says, "this is his name" or "this is what he's called," it's not saying, "You can call it that, but it isn't really true." Rather, it's saying, "This is what it really is." A name represents the truth of what something is. Several times in the Bible, God changes someone's name to better reflect who they are. When God said, "he will be called the Son of God" he was saying, "That's what he is."

Because Jesus is the Son of God, what happened in Bethlehem matters to more than just his immediate family. This event changed the world. This event was the beginning of the most important life in human history. Jesus was born for me. And for you. And for every person who will ever live. Jesus came because all people need a Savior. We all need someone to take away our sin. The Son of God alone was able to do that for the entire human race.

My friends, how much of what troubles us this time of year is our own fault? Joseph's relationship problems obviously weren't his fault. Mary was pregnant, so she must have slept with somebody right? Yet, did he ever give her a chance to explain it? The Bible certainly doesn't record that. Obviously, today, when people turn up pregnant, the reason cannot be the same. But in all our conflicts, in the issues that trouble our

marriages, in the things that sadden our families and disappoint us at this time of year, how often are we ourselves to blame? We expect things of our spouse, of our parents, of our children that we have no right to ask. And when we don't get those things, we get angry. We sulk. We drink. We take it out on other people. Or we get selfish. We spend too much money on ourselves or on others. We try to buy their affection and when it doesn't work, we're hurt. The list could go on and on. But in almost every situation that troubles our lives, we ourselves contribute to the hurt. Maybe we didn't start it. Maybe someone else has far more guilt than we do. But most of the time, we ourselves make the situation worse.

Why do we do that? Because we're sinners. Joseph and Mary knew that about themselves. It's still true for us today. Because we're sinners, we are doomed to lives of difficulty here and then God's punishment in hell forever. That's what every sinner deserves. But God loves us. He doesn't want to send even one of us to hell. So he sent his Son to die and rise for us. He sent his Son to be the Saviour, not just of Joseph and Mary, not just of Israel, but of the entire world. He sent Jesus into the womb of the Virgin Mary. When that first Christmas came, a baby was born. A real human child entered the world. But he was also the Son of God. By the time his life was lived, our lives were saved.

That is God's solution to all that hurts in this life. That is the light that comforts us and brightens even the darkest times here. Jesus came for us all. He wants to take every one of us to heaven with him. He promises us a new and better life to come. He stands with us and protects us and nurtures us through all that's frustrating here. He does not end the darkness of this life – not yet. But he does bring light. He does lift up our hearts. He does promise us an end to the darkness one day soon.

Jesus is God's gift to you. You know, sometimes when someone is really sad, you give them a gift. If your neighbor has a death in the family, you might bring over a crock pot of soup just so they don't have to cook that night. If a child suffers a disappointment, you might take them to a movie or get them ice cream, just to lift their spirits. Do those gifts solve the problem that's causing the hurt? No. They just show a little compassion at a difficult time. But imagine if you could give a gift that actually solved whatever the hurt was. That's what God's gift does. God gave you Jesus. He conquered sin. Sin is the cause of everything that hurts in this life. Through Jesus, God is going to give you a new and perfect life. That's a gift that brightens every season. Amen.