

## **The Christmas Story Considered**

I once read an article about a little church in Bethlehem that had undergone 14 attacks in one year by militant Muslim groups. These attacks were in the form of mental, emotional and even physical harassment; firebombs thrown into the church, etc. Their pastor had been wounded and it seemed that the church had very little reason to rejoice. In spite of these problems, they wanted to celebrate the Advent season. But what could they do to celebrate the coming of Jesus in a town where there's only a 2 percent Christian population?

They decided to have a Christmas party. They invited friends, relatives, neighbors, and many other converts to Christianity. They knew that there could possibly be radical Muslim spies at the party but, in spite of that, they wanted to share the love of Christ. They printed a thousand tickets to be passed out. They ordered food and drinks; arranged music and a large hall. Then on a cool evening in December they prepared the tables and waited. As the pastor stood by the door, he noticed a Muslim family with three small children coming toward him with tickets in hand. The tickets were for a party and this young Muslim couple appeared to be looking forward to an evening of relaxation, dancing and drinking. The pastor later acknowledged that he had mixed thoughts running through his mind. "Could these Muslim parents have been secretly sent to spy on us?" "Can I show the love of Christ to this family tonight?" We'll come back to this story later.

Matthew 1:18-25, the passage that we're addressing in this series of articles, will focus on the challenges of a young Jewish man and a girl and the birth of a special baby boy in the little village of Bethlehem on a night long ago. Let's get right into our text beginning with.....

### **—The Birth of Our Savior**

In the first 17 verses of chapter one, Matthew has gone to great lengths to show us the genealogy of Jesus Christ (1:1-17). There must be an Old Testament generational connection to King David for Jesus to be acknowledged as the true Messiah (e.g., 2 Samuel 7:11-16; Jeremiah 23: 5-6). As Matthew begins verse 18, the context for Jesus' birth is set and now we're given certain pertinent facts. "Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way." (1:18) The word translated "birth" here can also be translated "origins" in the sense that it speaks of the "beginnings" of Jesus Christ. We know that Jesus, the second person of the Holy Trinity is eternal, and yet what Matthew records here happens in space and time history as we're preparing for the second person of the eternal Trinity to take on human nature.

"When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together...." (1:18) Bible scholars and historians teach us that a Jewish "betrothal" was actually an "engagement" which was normally undertaken a year before marriage. This pledge to be married was legally binding and it could only be changed by divorce. This legal betrothal was so

binding that in verse 19, Joseph is called Mary's "husband."

".....she was found to be with child....." (1:18) The narrative has now taken an unexpected turn. Mary, who has never had intimate relations with Joseph, is pregnant. Matthew is clearly letting the reader know that Joseph cannot be the child's biological father. The fact that Mary is "found" to be with child is in no way pointing to her trying to hide any wrongdoing. It simply alerts us to the fact that, in the natural course of things, her pregnancy becomes known by her outward physical appearance. Although Joseph doesn't yet know this, the reader is told some very important information about the pregnancy. The Virgin Mary has conceived a child in a miraculous way. The child is, ".....from the Holy Spirit."

Joseph is now processing this news about Mary's pregnancy. "But as he considered these things..." (vs. 20) Joseph has a major problem. The word translated "considered" means that he thought deeply about the discovery of Mary's pregnancy. At this point in the narrative Joseph can only assume that Mary has been unfaithful to him. Can we even imagine the pain; or the tears that may be somewhat masked in public that come pouring down Joseph's wretched face in private? It only takes the tiniest bit of imagination to think of this young man overwhelmed, almost to the breaking point, because of having lost the love of his life. Mary is pregnant by someone else! In addition to the piercing sadness, there's the thought of personal betrayal which includes the very real potential of public ridicule, shame and disgrace. Divorce seems to be the only rational solution to this devastating problem.

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