

JESUS: The Greatest Life of All

STUDY TWO

A Relationship, a Courtship . . . a Miracle

Selected Scriptures

Christmas is a reminder of that great word, grace. It's a season when God takes us from where we were and brings us to where He wants us to be.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

EACH December, people hope for the perfect Christmas. They decorate their homes with festive wreaths covered with ribbons and bows and set out their finest holiday china. Children gaze with wonder at the Christmas tree, lit up with lights and adorned with ornaments, and dream of Christmas morning.

Despite our best plans, however, few Christmases rise to the level of perfection. Most of the time, the Christmas season is a bumpy ride of mishaps and mayhem. The car breaks down, the kids get the flu, the dog knocks over the Christmas tree, the roast burns, and the eggnog spills. Christmas can get messy.

The first Christmas was messy, too, but in its own way. Christ's birth took place in less-than-ideal circumstances. Mary delivered Jesus in a stable, laid Him in a feeding trough, and wrapped Him in rags—hardly the sterile environment of a hospital or the cozy atmosphere of a home. The “mess,” however, started long before Mary and Joseph ever made their way to Bethlehem. It all began in the rough, backwater town called Nazareth.



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PREPARE YOUR HEART

As you open the Word, ask the Lord to help you understand what it must have been like for Mary and Joseph during the days leading up to the birth of Christ.

Father, Your Son entered this world in the humblest of ways. A poor young couple welcomed Him in the bleakest of settings and most difficult of circumstances. Yet, they accepted God's plan with submissive obedience. May I learn from them and receive You as they did, with my deepest affection and faith. In His name, amen.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

For this *Searching the Scriptures* study, we'll turn to two passages: [Luke 1:26–38](#) and [Matthew 1:18–25](#). In the first passage, Gabriel visits Mary in Nazareth, and, in the second, an angel (perhaps Gabriel) appears to Joseph in a dream.

The timeline went something like this. In early spring, Gabriel came to Mary to tell her that she would bear the Messiah. After she became pregnant, Mary went to the hill country of Judea to visit her cousin, Elizabeth, where she stayed three months ([Luke 1:39–40, 56](#)). When Mary returned to Nazareth, she could no longer conceal her pregnancy, and she told Joseph everything. Soon after, the angel appeared to Joseph in a dream.

Let's rewind to the beginning when Gabriel visited Mary with news she never dreamed she would hear.



Observation: The Mess and the Miracle

In *observation*, we look at what the verses say before trying to interpret their meaning. Note the circumstances, the people, and the dialogue.



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The Town—Luke 1:26–27

What do you observe in *Luke 1:26–27* about the setting and the characters?

What can you infer about the reputation of Mary and Joseph's hometown based on Nathaniel's comment in *John 1:45–46*?

Nazareth was a little town in Galilee, insignificant and unimportant. One of my sources said, "People of Nazareth had a bad name among their neighbors for irreligion and laxity of morals." There was a military barracks there. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



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The Courtship—Matthew 1:18; Luke 1:27

Mary and Joseph were “betrothed” (Matthew 1:18 NASB; Luke 1:27 NASB)—which is a bit different from a marital engagement. Look up *betrothal* in your Bible-study resources and write down what betrothal meant to first-century Jews. For an online resource, consult the online article, “*Mary, Mother of Jesus*” in *The Encyclopedia of the Bible*.

The Problem—Matthew 1:18–19; Luke 1:28–34

Describe Gabriel’s visit with Mary, according to [Luke 1:28–33](#). Note the words the angel repeats to reassure Mary. How did Mary respond to seeing Gabriel? What key phrases did he use in his message to her?

What problem did Mary state in [1:34](#)?



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In the betrothal period, Mary was legally Joseph’s wife although they didn’t live as husband and wife. Joseph naturally assumed Mary was pregnant by another man. What problem confronted Joseph, according to *Matthew 1:19*? What do you learn about Joseph’s character based on what he considered doing?

If a woman is promiscuous during the betrothal year, the man has the right to take her before the elders of the synagogue and have her stoned. Or he could publicly disgrace her. Or, if he had compassion, he could divorce her quietly and pay to send her away to have the baby in secret. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

The Miracle—Matthew 1:20–25; Luke 1:35–38

The angel offered a single, divine answer that resolved both Mary’s and Joseph’s problems. In the chart below, compare what the angel said to Mary with what he said to Joseph. What key words stand out?

The Message to Mary <i>Luke 1:35–37</i>	The Message to Joseph <i>Matthew 1:20–23</i>



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What similarities and differences do you notice in the messages?

Now compare Mary's response with Joseph's response and write down what you observe.

Mary's Response <i>Luke 1:38</i>	Joseph's Response <i>Matthew 1:24–25</i>

When you link an act with God, nothing falls in the category of impossibility.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Interpretation: The Miracle of Jesus' Conception

Interpretation seeks to understand the passage as the original audience would have understood it. In the first century, the betrothal period was a busy time. Joseph would have been building his and Mary's house. Mary would be sewing her ornate wedding dress while her parents excitedly arranged all the wedding details.

Suddenly, Mary was pregnant, and everything got messy. Her pregnancy cast a dark cloud of suspicion over her and shame over both families. From all appearances, it was a scandal. Mary and Joseph's dreams of the perfect wedding and ideal newlywed life came crashing down.

Despite the ripples of ugly gossip swirling through Nazareth, Mary knew God was with her. He was replacing her wedding-day dreams with a far greater reality: *she would give birth to the Messiah*. The biblical text makes two points undeniably clear about Mary's pregnancy.



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First, *Mary was a virgin until the birth of Jesus*. The Greek word for “virgin” in *Matthew 1:23* and *Luke 1:27* is *parthenos*, which, in general, can refer to a young unmarried woman. But in Mary’s case, the writers were specific. They intended the word to mean, “virgin.”

Read *Matthew 1:18, 25* and *Luke 1:34* in the New English Translation, for a literal translation of the Greek with explanatory footnotes. How did the biblical authors clarify in these verses that Mary was a virgin when she conceived and gave birth to Jesus?

Second, *Jesus was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit*. In Matthew’s account, the baby was conceived “of the Holy Spirit” (*Matthew 1:18*) and “by the Holy Spirit” (*1:20*). In Luke’s account, Gabriel explained how:

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God.” (*Luke 1:35*)

God’s power overshadowing Mary reminds us of the account of creation, in which “the Spirit of God was hovering over” the empty earth before God spoke and created life (*Genesis 1:2*). How was the conception of Jesus similar?

Mary’s virginity and miraculous conception of Jesus prove that Jesus was the “Son of God” (*Luke 1:35*), not the son of Joseph. In the next *Searching the Scriptures* study, we’ll explore the union of divinity and humanity in Jesus in more detail. For now, let’s look at other ways the gospels affirm God is Jesus’ father.



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Each one of us has a part of our life that's got "Nazareth" written all over it—shameful, embarrassing, perhaps scandalous. But God, in His grace, brings us from Nazareth to Bethlehem. He has in mind a new birth, a new future, and a new direction.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Correlation: Jesus' True Father

In the genealogy recorded in [Matthew 1:16](#), how was Joseph listed?

How did Luke explain Joseph's role in Jesus' genealogy, according to [Luke 3:23](#)?

Even as a boy, Jesus knew the identity of His true Father. What did Jesus say to Mary and Joseph when they were looking for Him in Jerusalem, according to [Luke 2:49](#)?



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In John's record, Jesus consistently refers to His true Father as God. What was Jesus' response to the Pharisees when they asked Him about his father in [John 8:18–20](#)?

God is our Father, too, in a spiritual sense. But, by miraculous conception, only Jesus was fathered by God. Jesus alone is the Son of God who took on Adam's curse (fully human) without Adam's sinfulness (fully divine).



Application: From Nazareth to Your Hometown

Imagine starry-eyed Mary dreaming of matrimony, then suddenly hearing an angel say that she would become pregnant before her wedding. No one else heard the angel's words. Only Mary heard them, and only she experienced the miracle. Society would shame her. Her friends would shun her, and yet, to bear the Christ-child, Mary was willing to bear the scorn.

“May it be done to me according to your word,” Mary told the angel in humble obedience (Luke 1:38 NASB), foreshadowing Jesus' own submission: “Not my will, but Yours be done” (22:42 NASB).

Are you enduring hardship, even persecution, for doing God's will? How does Mary's faith encourage you?



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Knowing Mary needed support from her husband, God sent the angel to Joseph. In obedience, Joseph surrendered his dreams too. “He did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife” (Matthew 1:24). Joseph willingly sheltered his bride and her baby in his arms of care.

Perhaps God is calling you to be a “Joseph.” What qualities does Joseph inspire? Whom has God called you to shelter and support?

Joseph and Mary were nobodies from nowhere. They had neither noble pedigrees nor exceptional abilities. Not one drop of aristocratic blood flowed through their veins, and yet, their hearts surged with willing faith—and that’s all God requires from us as well.



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, Your values run contrary to the values of the world. You see what no one else sees: the faith in a person’s heart. I commit myself to You even as Mary and Joseph did, surrendering to Your plan for my life. Light the way, and I will follow wherever You lead. In Jesus’ name, amen.

