

The First Christmas Gift

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We're going to be looking at Matthew 1:18–25 and the first Christmas gift.

December 25 is, by far, the most popular holiday today, but not because of Jesus' birth. It's the biggest holiday of the year because that's when all the retailers make their money. They are all about pushing Christmas, which, now, is not really Christmas, it's "Happy Holiday." If you have lived for a while, you can see how they are trying to get Jesus more and more out of Christmas. Different stores are telling their employees, "Don't say 'Christmas,' say 'holidays.'" They're trying to keep all the celebration, but change it from the worship of Christ to the lining of their pockets.

Some say that Jesus wasn't even born in December. [They propose that] when Constantine conquered Rome and set up his kingdom, the worship of the sun [was celebrated] on December 25. [Constantine] didn't want Christians celebrating this day—it was the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year, which usually happens around December 21 or 22—so he decided that Jesus' birthday [would be celebrated at that time instead]. But we don't even know when Jesus was born, so it makes you wonder, "Are we celebrating [His birth in December] and he was [really] born in July?" That would be kind of interesting, wouldn't it? When *was* Jesus born?

Well, thankfully, there are a lot of clues in the Bible. We can look in the Bible, find these clues, and actually narrow down the time of Jesus' birth

to within a very reasonable time span, though [we can't get] the exact date. For instance, the Bible says that Caesar Augustus was the one who ordered the census that caused Joseph and Mary to [go] down to Bethlehem [see Luke 2:1]. We know that Caesar Augustus reigned from 44 BC to AD 14, which doesn't really give us much help, but it at least gives us a reference, [although it is] probably one of the weakest references. More helpful is that the Bible says in Matthew 2:1 and Luke 1:5 that Jesus was born during the reign, or before the death of, Herod the Great. Herod the Great, of course, was the maniac who killed all the children two years [old] and under so that he wouldn't have anybody threatening to take his throne.

We know when Herod died because the Jewish historian, Josephus, tells us that right before Herod's death, there was a lunar eclipse and that right after his death, there was the celebration of the Passover. Astronomers have the ability to calculate lunar and solar eclipses with precision, and they tell us that this eclipse happened March 13, 4 BC. Now, you might wonder, "How could it happen [in] 4 BC when Jesus wasn't born yet?" That is because our calendar is wrong. The calendar we use now was instituted in the sixth century, and they guessed at when Jesus was born. They wanted to make the calendar reference from the time of Jesus' birth, but again, records [from that time] were pretty scanty. So, we know that March 13, 4 BC, was the lunar eclipse that happened right before Herod died, and that the Passover was celebrated that year starting April 11. That narrows down a pretty neat time span when Herod must have died.

Not only that, we know that Herod died in the thirty-fourth year of his reign, which means [that] in order to be in the thirty-fourth year of his reign, he had to [have] die[d] after March 29, which tells us that he must have died between March 29 and April 11, 4 BC. That gives us a time span of thirteen days, [and] we can say [that] sometime in that period Herod died. Assuming the latest possible date for Herod's death, Jesus had to be born before April 11, 4 BC.

The Bible contains another key reference in Luke 2:1–5, and that is the census that happened while Quirinius was governor of Syria. The problem

is [that] there are no records of that census. The only census that is also recorded in the Bible—there are other references to it in history—is the one that [is] record[ed] in Acts 5:37, which caused a revolt. That must have happened around 7 or 6 BC. So, the question is: When did this census [mentioned in Luke 2] take place? Well, you have to ask yourself, “Why would the census take place [at all], especially if they were going to do one in 7 or 6 BC?” The answer to that question is that Herod, in the last two years of his life, had very poor health. His sons were trying to take the throne, [and] he killed one [of them], wrote the other one into his will, and there was all of this intrigue within the household of Herod. That’s why he was so paranoid. He was always paranoid, but he was really paranoid toward the end [of his life]. That’s why, instead of just saying, “What time was the child born?” to the magi, and they said, “This date,” [and Herod could have] said, “Kill every [child] in this narrow field [of time],” instead [Herod said], “Wipe out a two-year chunk [of children].” He was paranoid.

Well, this tells us, then, that Herod’s death was preceded by about two years of conflict within his own household between 6 and 4 BC. [All of Herod’s struggles], then, caused Caesar Augustus to call for a census in Herod’s territory, which would [then] be [the precursor] of the larger census that is recorded in Acts 5. So, we look at this, and we’re talking about [a time period] from 6 BC up to April 11, 4 BC. That’s about a two-year time span. Not only that, Luke 3:1 tells us that when Jesus started His ministry, He was about thirty years of age. It also says [that] He started His ministry in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar. Now, we know when Tiberius Caesar was reigning. The problem is [that] we [aren’t] exactly sure [of the dates] because [some] kings took their years of reign based off of the preceding year [and some took it from] the next year, so [that leaves a] three-year time period—sometime between AD 27–29—[that could] be the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar.

If you take [the Luke 3:1 statement that Jesus] “was about thirty years old” to mean Jesus was somewhere within two years either side of thirty, then, when you collect all of this information together, a date of about 5–4

BC seems to be the best [estimate] based on all the evidence. This would place Jesus' birth probably in the winter of 5 [BC], if He was born in December, or if He was born after December, in the latter part of the winter of 4 BC. So, [He was born sometime] around November to February.

Now, some have said, "Well, He couldn't have been born in the winter of that year because we see the shepherds out in the field 'watching over the flocks by night,' and we know that during the winter, the Jews took their sheep out of the fields, put them into pens, and fed them grass during the winter months." The problem is [that] the Jewish *Mishnah* says that thirty days before the Passover the Jews would let their lambs out into the field to graze for the thirty days leading up to the Passover. Now, if we know the Passover was on April 11, then we know that those shepherds could have been out there because of the thirty days leading up to the Passover. Not only that, the *Mishnah* says that in and around Jerusalem, they let [the sheep] graze all year. So, December 25 works as a possibility.

So, all that to say [that] we can be relatively certain, based off of all the biblical data and the accounts of two early church fathers, that December 25 is a very likely date [for Jesus' birth]. Though [it's] not a certain date, most likely Jesus was born in the winter of 5 [or] 4 BC. So, there you have it.

Let's look at the text—Matthew 1:18–25. You can follow along as I read:

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly. But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son; and

you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.” Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ”BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL,” which translated means, ”GOD WITH US.” And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife, but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus.

There is so much stuff here. I was just talking to Ed Wilde about how miserable it is to [have to] teach a big chunk of Scripture, especially one as neat as this, [instead of spending a lot of time on each individual verse].

What we’re going to do is we’re going to break this up into [sections about] three people: Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. We’re going to see what the text tells us about those three people, and in the process [we will] get an overview of what happened, the significance of what happened, and our response to what happened.

First, we want to look at Mary, specifically her conception [of Jesus]. Look at [Matthew 1:]18: “Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph. . . .” Now, just stop there. What’s interesting, and what is also confusing, is that when you read Luke’s account, there are some things [that] seem to indicate that they were engaged, which is fine. So, they were engaged. They were not only engaged when Mary became pregnant, but they were engaged, Luke says, when they were in Bethlehem right before Jesus was born. Here, [in Matthew 1:18], we learn that they are betrothed, which is kind of another way of talking about Jewish engagement. Yet the problem is [that] verse 19 says, “And Joseph her *husband*” [emphasis added] was intending to send her away.

Were they married or not? Was Joseph her husband or not? Were they just engaged or were they married? How can you divorce somebody you’re not married to? Some people say, “Well, obviously there’s a mistake here.”

Yeah, the mistake is in the brain of the person who thinks there's a mistake because what you really need to understand is Jewish custom, and then it all makes perfectly good sense. To the Jews, there were two stages [of marriage]. If you go back in the Old Testament and you look up "betrothed" or "engaged," you will find out that in Jewish custom [betrothal] was a legally binding contract [under which] you were arranged to be married to a certain person. In order to break that [contract], you had to get a divorce. So you were considered husband and wife from the time of what we would call "engagement," and that [contract] could not be broken except by a legally binding divorce.

So, Matthew, writing to Jews, says they were betrothed, refers to Joseph as Mary's husband, and then says [Joseph] was going to send her away, which was just a euphemism for "divorce her." Luke, writing to Gentiles, who [didn't] really understand all those things, just says they were engaged. That is how we understand it. [They] are [all] true—they were engaged, they were betrothed, and they were married.

We also notice in the middle of [Matthew 1:]18: "before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit." So much is left out here. I mean, Matthew, in an economy of words, tells us what happens: She was found to be with child. OK, how did that happen? Did she get morning sickness right away, and her mother noticed, [and asked] "Mary, why are you throwing up? What's going on here?" Did her mother suspect that or did she tell her mother right away after she was visited by the angel? Or, did Mary keep it to herself? [Luke 1:39–56] says she [went] to see Elizabeth for three months and then returned. Yet, when she returned, she would [have only been] three months pregnant. She'd hardly be showing, and they wore pretty loose clothing [so that would have hidden it as well]. It may have been not until quite a bit later that she was "found to be pregnant." [It] just says, "she was found," here in the text [in Matthew 1]. It doesn't give us the details of how she was found out to be pregnant.

As the baby grew in Mary's womb, you have to ask yourself, "What went through Mary's mind after she had become pregnant?" Put yourself

in her shoes. [An] angel visits you, tells you you're going to give birth as a virgin, [and] all of a sudden you're pregnant. That would be something, wouldn't it? That would be quite the experience. Mark Lowry's song, "Mary Did You Know?" captures [all these questions we might have] well. He asks a bunch of questions. Let me just read the lyrics:

Mary, did you know, that your baby boy would one day walk
on water?

Mary, did you know that your baby boy would save our sons
and daughters?

Did you know that your baby boy has come to make you new;
the child that you delivered will soon deliver you?

Mary, did you know that your baby boy will give sight to a
blind man?

Mary, did you know that your baby boy will calm the storm
with His hand?

Did you know that your baby boy has walked where angels
trod?

When you kiss your little baby, you kiss the face of God!

Oh Mary, did you know?

Oh Mary, did you know?

The blind will see, the deaf will hear, the dead will live again.
The lame will leap, the dumb will speak the praises of the
Lamb.

Mary, did you know that your baby boy is Lord of all creation?

Mary, did you know that your baby boy will one day rule the
nations?

Did you know that your baby boy is Heaven's perfect Lamb?

The sleeping child you're holding is the great I Am!

Mary, did you know?

The whole song asks all these questions [that], if he [had] read his Bible, he wouldn't have had to ask because he'd know that [the Scriptures answer] almost all of [them]. Now, think about this. What *did* Mary know? Well, let's just say for a second that you were Mary. You're a teenager—fourteen, [maybe] eighteen—[and] an angel appears to you and gives you a message. Do you think you would remember that? We tend to remember those traumatizing, engaging, adrenaline-pumping situations with some pretty good detail, don't we? And so, if the angel gave you some information, I think you'd remember.

Now that you're pregnant with this child, anytime you heard any information about your child from other people, do you think you would remember that? I think so. I think you would be very interested in this miraculous conception that has happened to you, and you would take very careful note. And you know how I know that? [It's] because it's here in the Bible. Where do you think Matthew got the information? Where do you think Luke got the information? They went and talked to Mary or talked to somebody [to whom] Mary [spoke].

But what does the Bible tell us? Well, in Matthew 1:21–23, right within our text, there are four things [that Mary knew]. [One:] She knew that she would bear a son as a virgin. That's pretty significant. [Two:] She knew to call His name “Jesus,” which means “Yahweh is salvation.” [Three:] She knew that Jesus would save His people from their sins. Now, that's a big one. [Four:] She knew that Jesus would be called “Immanuel,” which means “God with us.”

Then, from Luke 1:31–33, 35, 43, 69, 76, there are ten more things she knew. [Five:] She knew her son would be great. Six: She knew her son would be called the “Son of the Most High.” Seven: She knew the Lord would give Him the throne of His father, David, which means He would be the Messiah King. Eight: She knew that He would reign over the house of Jacob, which means He would have all of the twelve tribes under Him, and He would have sovereign dominion over them. Nine: She knew His kingdom would have no end, which was a reference also to the

prophecy that Nathan made to David, which was recorded in 2 Samuel 7 and 1 Chronicles 17 that said that David's descendant, his son, would sit on the throne and rule and reign over the house of Jacob for ever and ever, which makes Him not only a king, not only the fulfillment of the Davidic covenant, but immortal [as well].

Ten: She knew that she would be pregnant as a virgin because of the Holy Spirit and the power of the Most High overshadowing her. Eleven: She knew her child would be a holy child. Twelve: She knew her child would be called the "Son of God." Thirteen: She knew from Elizabeth that [the] child in her womb was Elizabeth's Lord. Fourteen: She knew that her child would be the "horn of salvation from the house of David." The word "horn" means "a symbolism of power" because animals have their power in their horns. You see this in the books of Revelation [and] Daniel in the visions, where the nations are described as having horns. Horns contain the power. In other words, He would be the power of salvation from the line of David. That's what Mary knew.

Now, just put yourself into Mary's shoes for a minute, and you know that about your baby. That'd be pretty significant: you have God Incarnate within you—the Son of God, the Son of the Most High, the Messiah, the King. You would probably feel like you had a bomb in you—a grenade with the pin pulled. You've got God Almighty within. There's the one text in Luke 2:19, where it says she "pondered all these things in her heart" after Jesus was born. I'm sure she was doing a lot of pondering at this point, too, wondering, "How do you raise God Incarnate? How do you raise the Son of God? Is He going to [come] out talking and walking? What do you do?" [It is] very, very interesting, and fun to think about. In heaven we'll be able to ask Mary all our questions about that.

[The] second person we come to in [Matthew 1:18–25] is Joseph. If you look at verse 19, it says: "And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly," or divorce her. It's hard to say what Joseph knew at this point. There are basically two possibilities: he either didn't know anything except that she

was pregnant and so was going to divorce her, or he knew that she was pregnant, knew why she said she was pregnant, and didn't believe her, and was going to divorce her. Maybe Mary had told her parents, and her parents, then, went and accused Joseph. I don't know about you, but if my daughter was engaged to somebody, and then became pregnant, I know whom I'd go after. Surely, that's most likely how Joseph found out.

Mary says, "Mom, Dad, I have something to tell you."

"Yes, what is it, dear?"

"I'm pregnant," [and her parents faint.] After they get up from the floor, [there was probably] some Jewish temper, some anger there, and rightly so. Deuteronomy 22:23–24 says:

If there is a girl who is a virgin engaged to a man, and another man finds her in the city and lies with her, then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city and you shall stone them to death; the girl, because she did not cry out in the city, and the man, because he has violated his neighbor's wife. (Even though she's just betrothed, [it calls her his] wife.) Thus you shall purge the evil from among you.

Mary's pregnancy would have been this huge, devastating blow to her parents. It would have disgraced her whole family. It would have put her life in danger. I'm sure [her father] would have [gone] over, and said, "Joseph, what did you do?"

And [Joseph] would have denied it, and said, "I didn't do anything."

Joseph had every right to publicly disgrace Mary. That means Mary [would have been] brought out in the community, and [Joseph would say] before everybody, because they all know that they were engaged and he was suspect number one, that he didn't do it, that she [had] been unfaithful. Then they would [have gotten] the stones [and] pummel[ed] her to death. That's what's going on here. You can imagine how Mary felt at this time, thinking, "I didn't do anything wrong, and now my life's in danger." Yet

our text says, if you look there, that Joseph, “being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly.” He decided, probably out of love for Mary, “You know what? She has already [been] disgraced enough, she’s already disgraced her family enough. What I’m going to do is I’m going to just dissolve the betrothal, divorce her, and that’ll be the end of it.”

Let’s say you’re a man engaged to a woman that you love, and you find out she’s pregnant, and you know it’s not your baby. What happens there? It would just rip your heart to pieces, wouldn’t it? You’re thinking, “Why? Why did [she] do this?”

You can imagine that even if he had some time to talk with Mary, and Mary said, “Joseph, it’s OK. God’s the father of my baby. I’m still a virgin. You see, it was the Holy Spirit and the power of the Most High that has overshadowed me. I’m going to give birth to the Son of the Most High, the Son of God, the Messiah and Savior of Israel.”

Joseph would have said what? “You need to go to a mental ward.” Who would ever believe that? Would you believe that? Some of you dads, [if] your daughter [said], “Yeah, I’m pregnant, Dad, but it was God,” [you would think] your daughter need[ed] treatment. No one would believe that.

All of this just lets us understand that something great was happening here. Oftentimes, when God does something great through us, we have to pay the price. In this instance, both Joseph and Mary, for a time, had to really go through some very heart-wrenching trials because both of them were being thrust into this situation, which they didn’t really anticipate. I mean, every woman wanted to give birth to the Messiah, but as a virgin, and trying to explain that, and trying to believe that?

This brings us to the third and central character of our text [in Matthew 1:18–25]: Jesus and His birth. Look at verses 20–26. In these verses [there are] six significant things about Jesus. We’re just going to go through these, kind of rapid-fire. It would be fun to just take each one, [do] a sermon a week [on them] and be done in February, but we’re not going to.

The first [significant] thing is [that] Joseph was of the line of David. Look at verse 20: “But when he had considered this,” that is, divorcing, or sending away Mary, “behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, ‘Joseph, son of David...’” Now, stop there and notice this: Joseph’s father was named Jacob, and it would have been normal, and proper, and the common thing to do to refer to [Joseph] as “Joseph, son of Jacob.” But when the angel refers to [Joseph], he refers to him as “son of David.” Why is that?

[It is] because in Hebrew thinking, anybody in the line of somebody was [that person’s] son. Jesus was also called the “son of David,” not because one of David’s wives gave birth to Jesus, but because He was in that line. The question is: How did Jesus get into the line? [He did it] through Joseph. Joseph was a son of David. That is, Joseph had the legal lineage connecting him to David. And so, when Joseph would take Mary as his wife, he would also be, in that process, taking Mary’s child, which would give Jesus legal rights through Joseph, through adoption, to be in the line of David. That is the significant point.

You see, in Genesis 49:10, when Jacob is giving his prophecies to each of his twelve sons, he says: “The scepter shall not depart from Judah,” which means that Jesus had to come from [the line of] Judah. Not only that, in the Davidic Covenant in 2 Samuel 7 and 1 Chronicles 17, it says that David’s son would rule and reign over the house of Jacob for ever and ever. Not only that, it was prophesied in Isaiah 11 that [Jesus] had to come from the offspring and shoot of Jesse. So, when you have all of these prophecies, it means that Jesus, in order to qualify as the Messiah, had to have the legal lineage of somebody who was of Judah, of Jesse, [and] of David. And so, by adoption, Jesus got all of that through Joseph.

Second, in the middle of [Matthew 1:]20, the angel says to Joseph in a dream, “do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.” Mary was the right choice—she was the one who was pregnant—but why is this significant? Well, if you go to Luke [3:23–28] (we’re not going to go there), we have the lineage of Jesus. Also, we have it at the beginning of Matthew 1, but

they're radically different. Do you know why? [It is] because Luke traces Mary's line back and Matthew traces Joseph's line. Matthew emphasizes His legal status, Luke, whose emphasis is the "Son of Man," traces [Jesus'] physical line through Mary on back. So we have both lineages—Mary providing the royal bloodline, Joseph providing the legal rights, together giving everything Jesus needed to be the Son of David who would rule over the house of David forever and ever.

Third, Jesus was conceived of the Holy Spirit. Look at the end of [Matthew 1:]20. The angel says to Joseph: "For the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit." Why? I mean, if Joseph is of the line of David and has all the legal rights, [and] if Mary has the [royal] bloodline, then why not just have Joseph and Mary get together, get married, and have a kid like people have kids today, instead of the virgin birth thing, and have [the child] be Jesus? Why [involve] the Holy Spirit? Well, this is the reason. Paul, in Romans 5:12, says: "Therefore, just as through one man," speaking of Adam, "sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned." Paul tells us that it is through Adam that death, sin, and the curse spread to all men. Everyone is a sinner because they are born sinners, because they are of the descendants of Adam who, when he sinned, was cursed. And so, we're all his descendants. Even though Eve was the first person to sin, and she, apparently, seemed just as guilty as Adam, yet we are all sinners not in Eve, but [in] Adam because that's how it is reckoned—through the father.

Now, if Jesus had an earthly father, He would need to have [had] a perfect father with a sinless nature, and those can't be found. So, God was Jesus' father, making Him without a sin nature, with no original guilt, with none of the curse of Adam upon Him so that He could be the perfect "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" [John 1:29]. Through adoption Jesus had the legal rights to the throne through Joseph, through Mary He had the royal bloodline, and through God He had a perfect, sinless nature. That qualified Him to be everything He needed to be: fully God and fully man in one person, two distinct, complete natures fused into one, into what

theologians like to call—the big word—the “hypostatic union.” [It’s] one of those words they invent to make sure people never remember [it]. The hypostatic union is what it’s called. Jesus, being fully God, could not sin, [and] was perfect; being fully man, He was able to offer Himself [as] a perfect, sinless substitute for sinners. That’s why that’s significant.

The fourth thing we see is [that] Jesus was the Savior of sinners. Look at [Matthew 1:]21: the angel goes on to say, “She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.” This tells us the purpose of Jesus’ birth: He was born to die so that He could save sinners. Jesus’ name, as I mentioned earlier, means “Yahweh is salvation.” The “He” when it says, “He will save His people from their sins,” is emphatic. It means “He Himself,” or “He alone” will save His people from their sins. Now, why is that a big deal? Well, it’s a big deal to be saved, obviously, but [the big deal here is that] every Jew knew that there was only one Savior, and this Savior was whom? The Lord God of Israel. So by saying Jesus was going to save people, it made Jesus the Lord God of Israel.

You know, Christians talk about being saved. I talk to people, [and they say,] “Yeah, I’m saved. I got saved in this year or that year.” We’re saved and we even say we’re “saved from sin.” But what exactly does that mean? We still sin as Christians, right? So how can you be saved from sin and yet still sin? Well, [it is] because there are three ways you are saved from sin. You have the first two now, and the third one awaits. The first thing you’re saved from is the eternal consequences of sin. [This] means [that] when you place your faith in Jesus Christ, when you understand you’re a sinner, that you deserve to be judged, [and] you believe in Jesus, His life, His death, His person, His burial, His resurrection, and you trust in that and that only to be saved, you are freed from the eternal consequences of sin. You will never go to hell, you can never undo your salvation, your salvation is sure and cannot be revoked—the gift and callings of God cannot be revoked. So you are safe if you’re saved.

Second, you're saved from sin in that you are freed from the *power* of sin. Before, Paul says, we were "slaves to sin" [Romans 6:6], that we did nothing but sin, sin mastered over us, but then once we come to Christ, sin is no longer master over us, he says in Romans 6, but we are free to "walk in newness of life" [6:4]. Now we have this freedom to obey or disobey. So whenever we disobey, it's not because God blew it, it's because we blew it. We don't *have* to sin anymore. And so, right now, if you are a Christian, you are saved from the eternal consequences of sin and the power of sin, but not the presence of sin. You're saved from the presence of sin when you die or the Rapture happens, Christ returns, you go to be with the Lord, and then you're no longer in the presence of sin. Sin is out of your being. You are free from its presence.

So in that way, we're saved from sin. But [do] you know what's interesting here? It's not really sin that we need to be saved from; it's God. We need to be saved from God Himself. This is kind of interesting to think about: God would be the one we need [to be] saved from, and yet He's the one who is willing to save us from Himself. You see, we often think that God is like us and that He's one way or another way. But He is all [that] He is infinitely all the time, and He cannot set aside pieces of His attributes or He would cease to be God. So, He is holy, He is perfectly just, and He will by no means allow the guilty to go unpunished. We have violated God's law in thought and deed, and therefore we deserve to be punished. Nothing can free us from that except if God could figure out a way to find a perfect, willing substitute, a human being who was without sin, who would willingly die and suffer His wrath in our place. Then He could pour His wrath out on that individual and we, by placing our faith in that individual, [could] receive His righteousness, [and] He our sins. We go free, and the righteous is punished as unrighteous. Of course, finding perfect humans is very difficult. That is why God sent forth His only begotten Son to be born of a virgin, because in doing that Jesus then could be that perfect sacrifice so that we, through faith in Him, could escape the wrath of God through Him.

That is why Christmas is so cool! [In] Romans 5:9, Paul, speaking more specifically, says, “Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him.” God the Son dies for us so that we may escape the wrath of God the Son to come. That’s what Christmas is all about.

Mary knew that there was only one Person who can save. She knew this. [In] Isaiah 43:11, God speaking, [says] “I, even I, am the LORD, And there is no savior besides Me.” God, speaking through the prophet Hosea in Hosea 13:4, says, “Yet I have been the LORD your God Since the land of Egypt; And you were not to know any god except Me, For there is no savior besides Me.” The angel tells Mary, tells Joseph, that this child is going to be the Savior. He’s going to save His people from their sins, which narrows down the category of who He could be to none other than God Almighty.

Fifth, we learn [in Matthew 1:]22–23 that Jesus is the fulfillment of Messianic prophecy. It says, “Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord,” again showing the inspiration of Scripture because Isaiah said it but the Lord was speaking through him, “through the prophet: ‘BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL,’ which translated means, ‘GOD WITH US.’” Now if you know the story of what happened [at the time of this prophecy], King Ahaz is having some troubles with some enemies. God tells Isaiah, “Isaiah, you and your son, Shear-Jashub, go talk to Ahaz and kind of give him the genie [option, and tell him that he can] ask for anything [he] wants and I’ll do it.”

Isaiah shows up to King Ahaz, and says, “You know what? These enemies of yours are going to be done away with shortly. In order for you to have confidence that this is going to come about, the Lord is commanding you to ask for a sign as deep as Sheol or as high as the heavens—anything you want—to prove that He is going to keep His word” [see Isaiah 7:10].

And Ahaz, who was a sinner, and rebellious, and didn’t love God, said this pious remark, “Well, I don’t want to test the Lord.”

“Well,” [Isaiah replies,] “God’s telling you to ask for a sign.” But [Ahaz] won’t do it.

So then the Lord says, “OK, I’ll give you a sign. Behold, a virgin shall conceive and give birth to a son and you shall call His name ‘Immanuel.’” [If] you think about it, that’s a pretty radical statement. But, there are some problems because in the following context, Isaiah approaches his wife and she gives birth to a son, who they call Maher-shalal-hash-baz.

Now, whenever you go to Starbucks, tell them to write that on the cup. That’s what I do. When they say, “And, what name do we put on that?”

“Maher-shalal-hash-baz,” and then they kind of pause, and I say, “Or ‘Jack’ is short for that.”

Anyway, “Maher-shalal-hash-baz” means “swift is the booty, speedy is the prey.” It just talks about the demise of these enemies that were plaguing the king. And he was born, and yes, right after that, [the enemies] were done away with, and people said, “See, it was fulfilled. Everything’s done, and so, Matthew must have blown it.” Well, there are some problems with that. First of all, Isaiah [and] his wife having a baby is not a sign as deep as Sheol and as high as heaven. Also, when Matthew quotes the text in Matthew 1, he’s quoting not from the Hebrew, but from the Greek version of the Old Testament, [which was] popular in that day, the LXX or the Septuagint. Now, the Hebrew uses a word for “virgin” that could either be “virgin,” or “maiden.” Some people say, “Yeah, that qualifies for ‘young wife,’ [or] ‘Isaiah’s wife.’” The problem is [that] Matthew quotes from the Septuagint and it uses a word that *only* means “virgin.” So we know from that [that Matthew is referring to Christ as the fulfillment of that prophecy]. But most of all, we know [to whom he is referring] because Matthew says so and Matthew was inspired.

But [Jesus] was not only the fulfillment of that prophecy, He was [the] fulfillment of a whole string of prophecies all the way back to Genesis 3:15, [where] it says that the woman’s seed—her male child—would crush the serpent’s head. Then after that [there is a prophecy] that [says that] Jesus would be of the tribe of Judah—Genesis 49:10. Then after that in 2 Samuel

[7] and 1 Chronicles [17], the prophecies in the Davidic Covenant [say] that He would be a son of David, that He would rule and reign over the house of David forever and His kingdom would have no end. And not only that, in Isaiah 9:6, [it says], “For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; And the government will rest on His shoulders; And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.” That was fulfilled. Also, in [Isaiah] 11 [it says] that He would be of the root of Jesse, and in Micah 5:2 [that] He would be born in Bethlehem.

All of these prophecies were fulfilled and the possibility of one person filling all of those at one time is pretty much impossible. Yet Jesus did it all, and you know what? He *had* to do it all. If Satan could have stopped one of those prophecies from being fulfilled, the Bible would not be true, God would be a liar, He would cease to be God, and the universe would unravel. But God’s promises are always faithful. Every prophecy has always come true just as God has said. Every detail, every promise, every prophecy of Christ’s birth in the Old Testament all came true exactly like it says, which qualified Jesus to be the Messiah.

Sixth and finally, Jesus is the firstborn son of Mary. Look at [Matthew 1:]24[-25]: “And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife, but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus.” Here, Matthew summarizes for us what happened after the angel appeared to Joseph, and he does it in one sentence. But, what’s interesting here is there appears to be a discrepancy between our text and Luke 2:5, where Luke says that when Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem they were engaged, not married. But we’ve already solved that mystery because Luke is writing to Gentiles so he’s giving the Gentile perspective. So we know that, yes, they were engaged, or betrothed.

But, when it says [Joseph] was supposed to take her as a wife, that [means that] he brought her into his home. But the text says he kept her a virgin. They didn’t physically consummate the marriage. Now, what you need to understand here are some things about marriage. You need to under-

stand marriage because [it] is important to understanding the significance of this point. There is a text in the Bible that in just one sentence gives God's blueprint for marriage. Can you think of where it is? It's quoted about three or four times in the New Testament. It's Genesis 2:24: "For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh." That is quoted multiple times in the New Testament—almost every text that has to do with marriage has that verse in it.

There are four things included in that one verse that must happen in order to have a full-blown marriage. The first is: there must be a man and a woman—"For this reason a *man* shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his *wife*" [emphasis added]. [This does] not [mean] a man and a man, [or] a woman and a woman—contrary to what is happening in America and the world. One man and one woman—that's what God says marriage is. Second, there must be a leaving of father and mother. A man shall leave, it says. This isn't a geographical thing. It isn't saying [that] as soon as you get married move to another state (although sometimes you feel like you want to do that when you first get married). So [if] it's not necessarily geographical, then what does it mean? It's talking about making a public statement that [says], "I am leaving this family unit as a priority and now I'm going to establish a new family unit." There must be a public declaration, a public leaving. Why? [It is] because if it's done in secret, then it's just fornication and immorality. So there must be a public declaration. Why? [It's] because by making a public declaration, the man is saying, "I am taking this woman to be my wife, and I am committing to loving her, taking care of her, and all of her children, until death do us part." That insures the safety of the woman.

Third, there must be an emotional bond. It says, "and be joined to his wife." This isn't the physical part, because that happens next. It's talking about [the fact that] both man and woman need to consent to be married. That is, they must both be willing to commit to this marriage relationship. Now, why is that important? [It's important] because if a guy goes

out there and just captures a woman, and sleeps with her, that is called kidnapping and rape because the woman is not consenting, she is not emotionally agreeing to commit to this bond of marriage. So, there must be not only a man and a woman, not only a public leaving, but there must be an emotional bond and commitment. Then, finally, fourth, the two shall become one flesh—[the marriage] should be physically consummated in sexual intimacy. All those four things must happen, and then you've got the full-blown marriage.

Well, our text says, in [Matthew 1:]25, that he “kept her a virgin until she gave birth.” Now, why is this important? For this reason: Because there are some who say that Mary was perpetually a virgin—the Roman Catholic Church teaches this, for instance—that they never consummated the marriage. Well, if that was the case, then they were never what? Married. Which means [that] Jesus was never Joseph's [son], which meant He didn't have legal rights to what? The throne of David. That is a huge deal. They *had* to be married. Thankfully, the Bible tells us that Joseph and Mary did meet all the biblical criteria because it says, “*until* she gave birth.” Not only that, but in Matthew 13:55, Mark 3:31, Mark 6:3, Luke 8:19–21, John 7:3–5, Acts 1:14, 1 Corinthians 9:5, and Galatians 1:19 [it says that] Jesus had [siblings]. So, we know that Joseph and Mary had other children besides Jesus after Jesus [was born]. Jesus, then, does qualify to be the firstborn son of Mary, the adopted firstborn son of Joseph, getting the legal rights, the bloodline, and everything He needs to be the Savior and Messiah of sinners.

How does all this apply? Well, it's interesting to know that December 25 might be the right day [for celebrating Christ's birth]. OK? That was just for free. And, it's interesting to think about Mary, and what it must have been like for [her], the trials she went through, how hard that was, and to think about that. It's sentimental. To think about Joseph and all he went through [is] very interesting [as well]. The Bible doesn't really give us much detail.

But the big deal, the one thing [that is] necessary [for] you [to] understand [is] that Jesus was the first Christmas gift. That is the big deal. I think we all know John 3:16: “For God so loved the world, that He *gave* . . .” [emphasis added]. That is a statement of the first Christmas gift—that God gave Jesus.

Romans 8:32 says it this way: “He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all.” Christ was God’s gift to us. When He was born, that was the first Christmas gift. God had concocted a plan where He didn’t have to set aside His holiness [and] He didn’t have to set aside His justice. He could punish every sin to the fullest degree [by] either [putting those sins] on the heads of those who would not repent, or on the head of His only, beloved Son, who was willing to have it happen so that [sinners], through faith in Him, could receive His perfect righteousness and He would receive their sin. He would, as Isaiah says, “be crushed for our iniquity” [see Isaiah 53:5].

That’s what Christmas is about. That’s the big deal. It’s not the Grinch, it’s not Santa, it’s not reindeer, it’s not lights, and the tree, and the turkey, and the stuffing. It’s God saying, “I love sinners and so I am now going to send My Son into this virgin’s womb so He can be born, fully man and fully God, so He can live a perfect life, so He can call some disciples and train them, so He can offer the kingdom and be rejected, crucified, die, [be] buried, and then resurrected.” He would then ascend into heaven, which is where He is now. He’s not the baby on the throne anymore; He’s the “King of kings and Lord of lords” [1 Timothy 6:15]. He’s going to come back in glory and it could be any day. You may not ever get those [Christmas] presents open, sorry to say.

If you know Jesus, [you] need to thank God, and praise God, and worship God, and be glad that God loved us so much He would give His only begotten Son for such wretches as ourselves.

If you don’t know Jesus, then this morning is the best day to know Him. You could receive God’s Christmas gift to you. He just holds it out and says, “And as many as receive this Gift, to them He gave the right to

become children of God, even to those who believe in His name” [see John 1:12]. If you’re willing to repent of your sins, turn from your sins, and trust wholly in God’s precious gift to you, God will save you, and it will be the gift that keeps on giving forever and ever. That’s what’s so great about Christmas: it is the celebration of that first Christmas gift.

I would pray this Christmas [that] if you don’t know Jesus that you would get right with Him, because He may come back and you don’t want to be on the wrong side of the fence when He comes back. Now He is extending mercy, but when He comes back, He [will be] extending justice.

When you open up presents under the tree this year, keep thinking to yourself that [those gifts are] nothing more than a symbol of the great gift given to us in the person of Jesus. Then all those gifts, whatever they are, will pale in comparison to the gift of God’s Son to you that you might have eternal life. Let’s pray.

Father, we thank You so much for all the great things we were able to see in this text. It’s kind of a shame to have to go so fast, and yet it’s good to do an overview. I just pray, Father, for all of us who know Christ here, I pray that we would leave here rejoicing that, yes, we have houses, and lights, and trees, and presents, and feasts, and all kinds of things to celebrate Your Son’s birth, but, Father, I pray that we would not miss Jesus in it all. That, Father, we would have our minds fixed upon You and Your Son and be thankful for all that You have given us—the gift of Your Son, that first Christmas gift. And, Father, if there’s somebody here whose heart right now is being humbled and he or she realizes he or she doesn’t know You, I pray he or she would cry out to You. That, Father, this Christmas Eve would be the time—the year 2006—when he or she receives the gift of Your only begotten Son. That he or she would turn from his or her wicked ways and unrighteous thoughts, and he or she would receive Jesus, and, Father, be saved forevermore. [That he or she would] be able to rejoice with You, with all the saints, with all the angels, in heaven for ever and ever because You loved us enough to send Your only begotten Son. Father, we pray these things knowing that You are sovereign, and You will bring them to pass in

Your own good time, in Your own good way, because of Your own good will. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

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