

HARD KNOCKS: When You Can't See How God's Way Could Work

A Study of Matthew 1:18-25

Characteristic of Completeness: Faith

Big Idea: The answer to impossible is Immanuel.

Related Scriptures: Psalm 46:1-11; Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 28:18-20; Luke 1:35-37; John 14:16-18; Romans 8:31-39; Hebrews 13:5

Introduction:

- A. Sometimes it's terribly hard to see how God's way could work. God's way often looks impossible. God's way doesn't always make sense to us.
1. God's way often comes straight from the Bible in the form of a hard saying. Like "love your enemies."¹ Or "be generous and ready to share."² Or "regard one another as more important than yourselves."³ And we think, "I don't see how this could work." Or "I will be devastated." Or "I have nothing left to give." Or "I will be taken advantage of."
 2. God's way sometimes comes by the Holy Spirit who calls us to do something weird. Like cross the Red Sea.⁴ Or march around Jericho seven times and blow the trumpets.⁵ Or like about fourteen years ago when He prompted me to leave the business world and go back to school to become a minister. I thought, "I don't see how this could work." And at first Cathy thought, "I see how it might work. I'll die and you go ahead, because I sure can't do it."
 3. God's way sometimes shows up through inescapable circumstances. Like a bad report from the doctor. Or a bad marriage. Or a bad work situation. And you think, "I don't see how this could work."

What do you do when you just can't see how God's way could work?

- B. The biblical text we're going to study today is Matthew 1:18-25. In it, we have a well-known case study on facing the impossible. Let's take a look.
1. Matthew ► 1:18 says:

^{NAU} Matthew 1:18 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.

¹ Matthew 5:44.

² 1 Timothy 6:18.

³ Philippians 2:3.

⁴ Exodus 14:1-31.

⁵ Joshua 6:1-21.

Now, this has all the makings of a soap opera. You see, this is a nice way of saying that, during the engagement of Mary and Joseph, before they ever consummated their marriage, Joseph found out that Mary was pregnant. In recounting the story, Matthew tells us that this is the work of the Holy Spirit. But Joseph didn't know that. Not at first. He assumed what any normal person would: Mary had been unfaithful. She'd been running around on Joseph. And he didn't see how this marriage could work.

2. So, ► Verse 19 says,

^{NAU} Matthew 1:19 And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly.

You need to know a little something about ancient Jewish customs to fully appreciate what is being said here. Engagement in ancient Judaism was legally binding and required a divorce to be broken.⁶ Engagement or betrothal often occurred when girls were very young, sometimes only twelve years old.⁷ The Jewish bridegroom would approach the father of the bride to demonstrate that he was willing to pay whatever price the father demanded for his daughter.⁸ The price was called the *mohar*.⁹ It's not that the bride was viewed as merchandise. No. The *mohar* demonstrated a bridegroom's love and commitment to his bride. A price had to be paid.

But before the payment could be applied, the bride must accept the proposal of the bridegroom.¹⁰ Once the father of the bride agreed to the *mohar*, and the bride accepted the proposal, they were considered husband and wife, and they entered a time of betrothal or engagement.¹¹ To break the betrothal was considered divorce.

Once engaged, the couple entered a time of preparation lasting about 12 months, during which they were to be separate and celibate. The bride was to prepare for married life, gathering and making the things she would bring into the marriage, including the clothing she would wear on the day her marriage would be consummated. The bride was considered sanctified or set apart exclusively for her bridegroom. The bride was to ready herself for the day when the bridegroom would come for her. In the time of preparation, the

⁶ Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew, The New American Commentary*, ed. David S. Dockery, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 57.

⁷ David L. Turner, *The Gospel of Matthew, Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*, ed. Philip W. Comfort, (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005), 40.

⁸ Renald Showers, "Behold, the Bridegroom Comes!," in *Israel My Glory*, February, March, 1975, pp. 8-12.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

bridegroom was to pay off the *mohar* and prepare the place where they would live.¹²

Once the *mohar* obligation was paid to the bride's father, the bride came under authority of her husband, but she would often remain in her father's house until the time of preparation ended.¹³

When ready, the bridegroom would approach the home of the bride, announcing that he had come to receive her to himself. The couple would then go to the house the bridegroom had prepared, and they would find family and wedding guests waiting for them there to celebrate their union. The celebration was sometimes called the *huppah*. Their marriage would then be consummated, and they would live together from then on.¹⁴

Back in our text, it is evident that Mary had come under Joseph's authority as his wife, but their time of preparation had not ended.¹⁵ Their marriage had not been consummated when Joseph learned of Mary's pregnancy.

In the wake of Mary's apparent unfaithfulness, Joseph didn't see how his marriage could work. And he had some options to end it. He could bring charges against Mary at a public trial that would surely end in divorce and complete community disgrace for her.¹⁶ Or he could draw up a bill of divorce himself, call upon two or three witnesses to sign the document, and be divorced more ► secretly.¹⁷ Verse 19 tells us that Joseph, being a good and gracious man, chose the latter option. That was Joseph's way.

3. But it wasn't God's way. God reveals to Joseph what He's up to as recorded in ► Verses 20-21. It says,

^{NAU} Matthew 1:20 But when he [Joseph] 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. 21 She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."

- a. God's way for Joseph was reasonably clear, but hard to swallow: God ahead and take Mary as your wife because she is still a virgin; she has not been unfaithful; she has conceived by the Holy Spirit.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Turner, 40.

¹⁴ Showers, 8-12.

¹⁵ Turner, 40.

¹⁶ W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *Matthew, The International Critical Commentary*, vol. I, eds. J.A. Emerton, C.E.B. Cranfield, G.N. Stanton, (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, Ltd, 1988), 204-205.

¹⁷ Ibid.

But I imagine Joseph might have been thinking, “I still don’t see how this could work. I mean, what will people think? They’re not going to believe in a virgin birth. Mary and I will both be disgraced. The child will be ostracized. How is He going to save the people? I don’t see how this could work.”

- b. It was a crisis of faith for Joseph, and from an entirely different perspective, it can be a crisis of faith for us. Reasonable people today, even those who believe in Jesus, can look back at this story and say, “I don’t see how this could work. I don’t believe in the virgin birth. Women don’t spontaneously get pregnant without human, biological fathers. Maybe Matthew just made this up to sell Jesus. How can anybody believe in a virgin birth? And is it all that important anyway?”

Good questions. First, I want to give you a few reasons why I believe in the virgin birth of Christ. Second, I want to show you why the virgin birth is important and relevant today. Eventually, this is going to take us right back around to that important question: What do you do when you just can’t see how God’s way could work?

- I. First, ► let me give you a few reasons why I believe in the virgin birth of Christ. I freely admit that it can be hard to believe, but you don’t have to check your brains at the door to accept it. It is not, so to speak, inconceivable.

- A. If I were to take a flying leap off a cliff, what we’ve come to observe as the law of gravity would, in all probability, take me to an abrupt, unpleasant end. But, if I were to take the same flying leap with a hang glider the results would be different (assuming I knew how to hang glide). I’d fly. Would my flying violate the law of gravity? No. What we’ve come to know as the principle of aerodynamics would simply supersede the law of gravity in that case.

Similarly, when a miracle occurs, such as the virgin birth of Christ, it simply means that a supernatural principle has superseded a natural one. The difference here is that we don’t understand the supernatural principle. But, the virgin birth does not require our understanding in order to be true.

Indeed, if God is the all-powerful Creator of everything, including those natural processes we have observed and described with scientific principles, then wouldn’t it be reasonable for Him to supersede those natural processes any time He wants for whatever purpose He wants? I think so. In the parallel account of the virgin birth, the angel of the Lord explains in ► Luke 1:37:

^{NAU} Luke 1:37 “For nothing will be impossible with God.”

- B. The skeptic may say, “Well, that’s just a matter of blind faith, and I just don’t believe it.”

Faith, yes. Blind, no. At least not uniquely blind. It’s true; it *is* a matter of faith. And yet, I would contend that even the hardest atheistic evolutionist has faith in something quite similar to a virgin birth. I’m not an expert in evolutionary theory, but if you think we all evolved from a single life form that emerged billions of years ago quite apart from any god, then wasn’t the emergence of that very first life form a kind of virgin birth? If you trace back the ancestry of humankind to the very first life form, that life, by definition, had no biological antecedent. No father. So, how does the atheistic evolutionist accept this fatherless creation of life? There is no proof. There is no explanation. He accepts it by faith.

You see, I think we all live by faith. Every one of us. We are merely differentiated by the object of our faith. In fact, ► faith is our Characteristic of Completeness for the week. Faith in God.

- C. Some may argue that Matthew fabricated the virgin birth to make it fulfill the Old Testament prophecy concerning the coming Messiah. Maybe Matthew just made up the story so it would fit the prediction of the virgin birth. Maybe he was just playing to people’s expectations. After all, in ► Verses 22 and 23, Matthew says:

^{NAU} Matthew 1:22 Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 23 “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.”

As indicated by the bold letters, Matthew is quoting Isaiah 7:14, written hundreds of years before Christ. Many scholars today look back and see Isaiah 7:14 as predicting the virgin birth of the Messiah. I agree.

But here’s the deal: We have no shred of evidence that anyone before Matthew saw this verse in Isaiah as something that would have to be fulfilled by a coming Messiah.¹⁸ No Hebrew scholar, no scribe, no Pharisee, no Sadducee, no priest, no rabbi, no Jew was expecting the Messiah to come by virgin birth. So, Matthew couldn’t have been playing to people’s expectations of a virgin birth because nobody was expecting any such thing.

- D. Some may say, “Well maybe Matthew just made up the virgin birth story to make a bad situation look better. It wouldn’t look good for Jesus to be the product of illicit premarital sex, so maybe Matthew just tried to cover it up.”

¹⁸ Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part One*, (London and Louisville, KY: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge and Westminster John Knox Press, 2002, 2004), 7.

Only one problem with this argument. We know that Matthew is not the least bit concerned about covering up or prettying up the disreputable links in Christ's lineage. As we saw last week in Matthew's introductory genealogy, he actually highlights the most scandalous parts: seduction, prostitution, voyeurism, adultery, and murder.¹⁹ Matthew was obviously not trying to put a positive spin on things.

- E. Upon reflection, I can't think of any good reasons for Matthew to put the virgin birth into his story. Unless it's true.
- II. That brings us to ► the second question: Why is the virgin birth important? What's the significance? How is it relevant to us today? Let me give you a few reasons. It's not an exhaustive list. But it builds to a crescendo. The last reason is the big one. It helps us answer the question: What do you do when you just can't see how God's way could work?
- A. First of all, I think the virgin birth is important because ► it helps us see that our salvation comes from God and God alone. Notice who is responsible for the virgin birth in our text. It is God, the Holy Spirit. It is God who saves us through Jesus Christ. We do not and cannot save ourselves.
- God came into the world in the person of Jesus Christ that He might take our place in bearing the punishment for our sins, to save us from the penalty of sin. God did all the work. He conceived our salvation. He initiated it. He completed it. And, he offers it to us as a gift, according to His grace. Ours is only to receive it through faith alone in Christ alone.
- The virgin birth affirms that our salvation is a gift from God.
- B. Secondly, the virgin birth is important because ► it helps us see more clearly the uniting of deity and humanity in one person. Jesus is God, and Jesus is a man. He is fully God and fully human. Now, this is still a difficult idea, but the uniting of deity and humanity is a little easier to understand by virtue of the virgin birth.
1. I suppose it would have been possible for God to have Jesus simply appear on earth from heaven, sort of like Captain Kirk beaming down from the Starship Enterprise.

But, if He had done that, I think we'd be much more tempted to say that Jesus is not really human. "He can't relate to our human condition." "He's not one of us."
 2. Conversely, I suppose it would have been theoretically possible for God to have Jesus emerge from the natural union of Joseph and Mary.

¹⁹ As represented by Tamar, Rahab, and Bathsheba.

But, if He had done that, I think we'd be much more tempted to say that Jesus is not really God. "There's absolutely nothing extraordinary about Him."
"He's just one of us."

Only a virgin birth perfectly portrays the union of God and man in the person of Jesus Christ.

- C. Thirdly, ► the virgin birth is important because it helps us see how Jesus could be without sin.

The Bible tells us that, ever since Adam and Eve, our sinful human nature is inherited from one generation to the next. Like a long succession of crack babies, we inherit an addiction to sin.²⁰

But, at the same time, the Bible tells us that Jesus was without sin.²¹ How can this be if all babies inherit sin? The virgin birth tells us that Jesus is a special case. God intervened in a miraculous way to preserve the baby Jesus sinless. The virgin birth affirms the sinlessness of Jesus.

- D. That brings us to ► the final reason I want to mention: the big one. At least I think it's Matthew's primary emphasis. The virgin birth tells us something very important when we don't see how God's way could work. The virgin birth gives us something to hang onto when things look impossible. And remember, as I said last week, things looked impossibly bleak for many Jews in the first century for whom Matthew's gospel was written.

1. Here's the main point of our text. Here's why Matthew emphasizes the virgin birth. Here's what the main thing the virgin birth says to us. Here's ► the big idea: The answer to impossible is Immanuel. The answer to im-poss-i-ble is I-mman-u-el. When human possibilities have run out, Immanuel comes in. When we can't see how, we can still see Him. Let me explain.

Let's return to ► Verses 22 and 23. It says,

^{NAU} Matthew 1:22 Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 23 "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."

- a. In ancient Jewish culture, names were a big deal. They tell a lot about who a person is.²² Here, Matthew identifies Jesus with the name, ► "Immanuel." It means, "God with us."

²⁰ See for example, Psalm 51:5.

²¹ See for example, 1 John 3:5.

²² Wright, 7-8.

The name is of Hebrew origin.²³ Which is interesting because most of Matthew's original readers were Hebrews and, therefore, they knew exactly what it meant. No need for translation. But Matthew translates it anyway for emphasis: "God with us." That's the primary significance of the virgin birth: God, in the person of Jesus Christ, is with us. Conception by the Holy Spirit makes it absolutely clear. The answer to impossible is Immanuel. God is with us.

- b. You would not be far wrong to say that "God with us" is a theme woven throughout the gospel of Matthew. It's here at the beginning. And look with me at the very end of Matthew, where Jesus says to his followers in ► Matthew 28:20:

^{NAU} Matthew 28:20 ". . . I am with you always . . ."

The mention of the same idea at the beginning and end of a piece of writing is a literary framing device known as an *inclusio*. This *inclusio* tells us that Matthew is about "God with us."²⁴ The answer to impossible is Immanuel. God is with us.

The English translation of Jesus's statement, "I am with you always," waters it down just a little. A more literal translation is: "I am with you ► all the days." All the days. Not just the good ones.

2. This is such an important reminder to us when things seem impossible—when we just don't see how things could work. God is not far away. God has not left us. God is not hiding. God has not abandoned us. God has not withdrawn His promises. The answer to impossible is Immanuel. God is with us.
- a. God's way often comes straight from the Bible in the form of a hard saying. Like "love your enemies," or "be generous and ready to share," or "regard one another as more important than yourselves," And you think, "I don't see how this could work. I will be devastated. I have nothing left to give. I will be taken advantage of." If God were not with you, you'd be right. But the answer to impossible is Immanuel. God is with us.
- b. God's way sometimes comes by the Holy Spirit who calls us to do something weird. Like cross the Red Sea. Or march around Jericho seven times and blow the trumpets. Or like about fourteen years ago

²³ *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, rev.ed., vol. 2, s.v. "Immanuel," by Arthur Walwyn Evans (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1988).

²⁴ Blomberg, 60-61; Turner, 45; Wright, 8;

when He prompted me to leave the business world and go back to school to become a minister. I thought, “I don’t see how this could work.” If God were not with me, I’d be right. But the answer to impossible is Immanuel. God is with us.

- c. God’s way sometimes shows up through inescapably hard circumstances. Jesus says, “I am with you all the days.” Like the day the doctor says, “There’s nothing else we can do.” Or the day when your spouse says, “I don’t love you anymore.” Or the day when your boss says, “I’m going to have to let you go.” Or the day when your six-month-old stops breathing. I know some of you are experiencing these days right now. And you think, “I don’t see how this could work. I can’t do this.” And if God were not with you, you’d be right. But the answer to impossible is Immanuel. God is with us.
- d. And this is not just the message of Matthew. Psalm ► 46 is a song with a recurring chorus:

^{NAU} Psalm 46:7, 11 The LORD of hosts is with us; The God of Jacob is our stronghold.

The answer to impossible is Immanuel. God is with us.

- e. Also, the Apostle Paul asks an important question in Romans 8—a question intended to point out that God is with us. In ► Verse 35, he asks:

^{NAU} Romans 8:35 Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . ► ³⁷ But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. ► ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The answer to impossible is Immanuel. God is with us.

3. How ► can we get this through our heads? How can we remind ourselves of this truth? How can we put it to work?

Maybe you could put a Post-it on your computer monitor or on your bathroom mirror or on your dashboard that simply says, “Immanuel.” Maybe this week, you could pick one of the verses I’ve presented relating to God’s presence and

read it every day and memorize it. Maybe you could commit yourself to thanking God each day this week for His presence. Maybe you could wax philosophical with a friend: “If God is with us all the days, what difference does that make in my life?” Maybe you could download this sermon transcript later this afternoon to review it and chase down the related Scriptures for yourself. Maybe you could comfort a friend today with this simple truth. Maybe you could ask God to refresh in you the experience of His presence—to give you an extraordinary sense of it.

4. Back in our text, Joseph’s encounter with the angel of the Lord convinces him: God is with us. With that knowledge, he boldly, obediently, faithfully steps right into his impossible situation. What he does reflects a very simple outlook in the midst of an impossible situation: Trust and obey because God is with us. Simple. But not easy. Verses ► 24 and 25 tell us plainly:

^{NAU} Matthew 28:24 And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took *Mary* as his wife, 25 but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus.

The name, “Jesus” means, “the Lord saves.”²⁵ Yes, He is with us. He comes to save. The answer to impossible is Immanuel.

²⁵ Blomberg, 59.