The key to understanding Matthews 1:18-25 sits under the front doormat. Verse 18 begins: “Now the birth of Jesus Christ happened this way.” While Luke writes his birth narratives from the perspective of Mary, Matthew writes from the perspective of Joseph. So Joseph gets the most screen time in this text. But this story is not about Joseph or Mary or the angel of the Lord. Jesus is the star of this story. He does not show up until the last verse of the chapter. Yet he dominates every verse. This passage is about the birth of Jesus Christ.

The point of Matthew’s Gospel is that Jesus of Nazareth is, as verse 18 calls him, “Jesus Christ.” Jesus is his personal name. Christ is his ministerial office. Christ is the New Testament word for the Old Testament word Messiah. It means “Anointed One.” God promised to send a Messiah-King to bring salvation. Jesus was the fulfillment of the promise. Jesus is the Christ.

Matthew 1:1-17 records the genealogy of Jesus through forty-two generations, tracing his ancestors back to Abraham and David. The genealogy takes a strange turn at the birth of Jesus. The pattern is that one man begat another man who begat another man. Then verse 16 says: “and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.” Jacob is called the father of Joseph. But Joseph is called the husband of Mary who was the mother of Jesus. This verse raises some obvious questions. Matthew 1:18-25 answers these questions. It teaches the birth of Jesus Christ was a miracle of divine incarnation by which God saves sinners. The text tells the story of Christmas in four episodes.

I. THE VIRGIN BIRTH

When asked who he would like to interview from history, LARRY KING named was Jesus Christ. KING explained: “I would like to ask him if he was indeed virgin born, because the answer to that question would define history.” Fortunately, you do not does an interview with Jesus to discover the truth of the virgin birth. The Bible clearly teaches that Jesus was supernaturally begotten of God and born of Mary, who was a virgin. The virgin birth took place in the scandalous drama of Mary and Joseph.

A. MARY’S PREGNANCY

Verse 18 says: “Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.” Betrothal was different than engagement. Many engagements do not make it to the wedding day. Betrothal was as binding as marriage. It was a yearlong period before marriage in which the couple was considered husband and wife. They lived separately during this period and were not to share physical
intimacy until the wedding. Yet a betrothal was so binding that it could only be terminated by divorce. During her betrothal to Joseph, Mary became pregnant before they came together in marriage. The language of the text suggests that Mary did not break the news to Joseph. It became apparent as her growing baby bump began to show. But the biggest surprise was that Mary’s child was conceived by the Holy Spirit. 

The angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she would have a child. In Luke 1:34, Mary asked, “How will this be, since I am a virgin.” In Luke 1:35, the angel Gabriel tells Mary, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy – the Son of God.” The birth of Jesus was a TRINITARIAN act. The only begotten Son of God became a human being by the supernatural work of Holy Spirit. Scripture does explain how the conception of Jesus took place. And we should not speculate. We should simply and reverently believe what the word of God says. Science has found a way to impregnate women through artificial insemination. If man can produce conception artificially, God the Holy Spirit can produce conception supernaturally.

B. JOSEPH’S PROBLEM

Verse 19 tells us how Joseph responded to the crisis of Mary’s pregnancy: “And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.” Two seasons of life reveal what a person is made of: prosperity and adversity. In this season of adversity, we see what kind of man Joseph was.

JOSEPH WAS A MAN OF CHARACTER. Verse 19 calls Joseph “a just man.” He trusted and obeyed God. He was zealous in keeping the law of God. Joseph would not commit sexual immorality with Mary or condone the fact that she apparently did it. Joseph did not embrace alternative lifestyle choices as a matter of opinion. He believed that God is true, sin is wrong, and holiness is right.

JOSEPH WAS A MAN OF COMPASSION. Joseph’s heart was broken by the notion that she was unfaithful to him. But he did not respond in anger, bitterness, or vengeance. Joseph was more concerned about how the unfolding circumstances would affect Mary. Deuteronomy 22:23-24 viewed a betrothed virgin that is sexually defiled as an adulterer. It was a crime punishable by death, though it was rarely carried out during the time of Christ. Joseph had the right and responsibility to charge Mary with a crime. But he loved Mary too much to put her to shame.

Godliness is truth and love, judgment and mercy, conviction and compassion. Joseph models true godliness. He did not want to condone Mary’s apparent sin. Yet he did not want to put her to shame. He expressed his love without violating his integrity. Verse 19 says: “he resolved to divorce her privately.” Rather than bringing charges against Mary, he would sign a writ of divorce before two witnesses, without stating the grounds for the divorce. This course of action put Joseph as risk. The community would not tolerate a “baby daddy” that got a girl pregnant without taking responsibility. But Joseph was moved to let Mary look innocent and cause him to look guilty. That’s love.
II. THE ANGELIC ANNOUNCEMENT

Joseph resolved to divorce Mary privately. Yet verse 20 states “he considered these things.” This is further proof that Joseph was a just man. A foolish man makes hasty decisions. A wise man considers his ways. Proverbs 3:6 says, “In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.” The Lord did this for Joseph. As he slept one night, Joseph had a dream in which the angel of the Lord revealed the truth about Mary and Jesus.

A. THE TRUTH ABOUT MARY

Verse 20 reports: But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do no fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” The angel called Joseph by name. Then he addressed Joseph by title: “son of David.” In the New Testament, this title is always used of Jesus, except here. Joseph was a part of the royal bloodline of David. This is the point of Matthew 1. Matthew argues that Jesus is the king of the Jews. But his argument is nullified from the start if Jesus is not the legal heir to the throne of David. God orchestrated human affairs so the virgin mother of Jesus would be betrothed to a man in David’s family tree. But Joseph was rightly afraid to proceed with the marriage. Had Mary been unfaithful? What would the community think? Who was the child’s father? In our day, when an unmarried girl becomes pregnant, it most severely affects her. In biblical times, it was more of a reflection of the man who got her pregnant. For Mary to become pregnant before their wedding, the community would have concluded that Joseph violated her, unless he pressed charges against her to clear his name. Yet the angel commanded: “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”

B. THE TRUTH ABOUT JESUS

Verse 21 says, “She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” The angel told Joseph three truths about Jesus. First, the angel announced his gender: “She will bear a son.” In verse 20, the angel calls the baby “that which is conceived in her.” Now he declares that Mary’s baby will be a son. Isaiah 9:6 says: “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

Secondly, the angel announced his name: “and you shall call his name Jesus.” In Luke 1:31, Gabriel told Mary, “And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.” Jesus was a common name with a special
meaning. It is the Greek version of the Hebrew name, Joshua. It means, “Jehovah Saves” or “The Lord is salvation.” Parents named their children Jesus in the first century. It expressed their hope that the Lord would save them from the occupying forces of Rome. The birth of Jesus was the salvation of the Lord.

Thirdly, the angel announced his mission: “for he will save his people from their sins.” Israel rightly expected the Lord to send the Messiah-King to save them. They wrongly expected the Messiah to be a military hero who would overthrow Rome and restore Israel to prosperity. Jesus came to save sinners. We are sinners. Romans 3:23 says: “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” We cannot save ourselves. Isaiah 64:6 says: “We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.” But Jesus has come to save us from our sins. John 3:16-17 says: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

III. THE FULFILLED PROPHESY

Joseph’s betrothed wife became mysteriously pregnant. An angel appeared to Joseph to defend the purity of Mary and announce the birth of Jesus. In verses 22-23, Matthew comments on these remarkable events. These verses declare the birth of Jesus was an act of divine revelation and divine incarnation.

A. THE BIRTH OF JESUS WAS AN ACT OF DIVINE REVELATION.

Verse 22 says: “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet.” Matthew wrote to a Jewish audience to declare that Jesus is the promised Messiah-King. Matthew regularly cites Old Testament scriptures that point to Christ. Here he cites a passage that is fulfilled in the birth of Jesus. Notice how Matthew introduces this passage from the prophesy of Isaiah: “The Lord spoke by the prophet.” The words Matthew quotes here are the very words of the Lord God, spoken through the mouth and pen of the prophet Isaiah. This is an affirmation of the divine inspiration of scripture in the very first chapter of the New Testament. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 says: “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” The Bible is not man’s thoughts about God. It is God’s self-revelation to man. The divine inspiration of scripture is affirmed in the Person and Work of Christ.

B. THE BIRTH OF JESUS WAS AN ACT OF DIVINE INCARNATION.
Verses 22-23 says: All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us). Matthew cites Isaiah 7:14, which predicts the virgin birth. Who is this virgin-born child? Verse 23 answers: “and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us).” Jesus is his name. Immanuel is his title. Jesus is his mission. Immanuel is his nature. Jesus is what he does. Immanuel is who he is. Jesus is the transcendent one: God. And Jesus is the imminent one: with us. Jesus is of Nazareth is God with us. This is the point that bookends Matthew’s Gospel here and in Matthew 28:18-20: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter are the ultimate proof that God is with us!

IV. THE RADICAL OBEDIENCE

Joseph is the Rodney Dangerfield of Christmas. He can’t get no respect! A large cast of characters converges at the birth of Jesus. Mary the mother of Jesus is rightly honored. The angelic messengers are hard to ignore. But Joseph is the forgotten man of Christmas. The shepherds, wise men, and innkeeper get more attention than Joseph. He deserves better. Joseph is a profound example of what it means to trust and obey God. We see his character on display by his marriage to Mary and the birth of Jesus.

A. MARY BECAME JOSEPH’S LEGAL WIFE.

Verse 24 says, “When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife.” After the angelic messenger invaded his dreams, Joseph abandoned his plan to divorce Mary. He even forsook the customary yearlong betrothal to marry Mary immediately. By marrying his betrothed who was with child, Joseph ensured that Mary’s baby would be an official part of his family lineage. Joseph was, as the angel addressed him, “son of David.” He was a descendent of King David. Therefore, any children born into his family would be a part of the Davidic line of kings. By Joseph wedding Mary who was with child, the Lord kept a promise he made to David centuries ago. In 2 Samuel 7:16, the Lord said to David, “And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.” This is the real meaning of Christmas. God always fulfills his promise. It may take a just man, pregnant virgin, and miracle baby to do it. But God always keeps his promises.

B. JESUS BECAME JOSEPH’S LEGAL SON.
Verses 24-25 says: “he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.” Joseph married Mary. They lived together as husband and wife, with one exception. The newlyweds did not consummate their marriage until after she gave birth to a son. Sexual abstinence was not a part of the angelic command. Joseph voluntarily abstained from sexual relations with his wife, until after she gave birth to a son.

The birth of Jesus is arguably the greatest miracle, except for his resurrection from the dead. God became a fetus. The Creator of life created himself in the womb of a woman he created. He who is larger than the universe became an embryo. Omnipotence became breakable. He who is Spirit became pierce-able. The ancient of days became the infant of days. He who sustains the world chose to be dependent upon the nourishment of a virgin girl. When Mary gave birth to the son, Joseph exercised the paternal right to name him. But he named the child in obedience to the commands of the angel of the Lord. He called his name Jesus.

- Jesus is the name of prophetic fulfillment.
- Jesus is the name of supernatural power.
- Jesus is the name of gospel mission.
- Jesus is the name of amazing grace.
- Jesus is the name of redemptive accomplishment.
- Jesus is the name of eternal life.
- Jesus is the name of sovereign authority.

My father needed financial assistance for college. A family offered to help. They invited him to dinner. After the meal, the father gave my father a check for the funds he needed. When my father noted that the man had misspelled “Charles” on the check, he replied “That’s okay, son. It’s my name on the check that counts. Not yours.”

There is a Name I love to hear, I love to sing its worth;
It sounds like music in my ear, the sweetest Name on earth.

It tells me of a Savior’s love, who died to set me free;
It tells me of His precious blood, the sinner’s perfect plea.

It tells me what my Father hath in store for every day,
And though I tread a darksome path, yields sunshine all the way.

It tells of One whose loving heart can feel my deepest woe;
Who in each sorrow bears a part that none can bear below.