

INTRODUCTION

Sometimes we envy the life of the celebrities. We think that they live in a different world. More than likely they are wealthy, and so they live better, dress better and eat better than us. But there is a cost for being well-known. Wherever they go, those famous people are usually chased after by some photographers called paparazzi. The paparazzi make a living by selling pictures that disclose people's private life. For example, where the celebrities go for vacation and with whom they associate. To disguise themselves as ordinary citizens, some famous people may dress in plain clothes, wear a hat and a pair of sunglasses when they go out. However, sometimes well-known figures may pass by us without catching any attention. On January 12, 2007, the Washington Post did an interesting experiment. Joshua Bell, a world-renowned violinist, wore T-shirt and jeans and appeared at one of the D.C. Metro stations. He opened his violin case, grabbed his \$3 million instrument and began to play some classical music. For the next 45 minutes perhaps a thousand people streamed by but most of them were too busy to listen. Ironically, just three days ago Bell had a sold-out concert at the Boston Symphony Hall. The cheapest seats sold for \$ 100 each. How much did this street musician earn that day? At the end of his show, 27 people stopped for a few moments to enjoy the music. They contributed a total of \$32. An awesome and free performance went unnoticed because people did not expect to meet such a master musician at an unusual spot. That night when Jesus was born the world was going on as usual. No one expected the Master of the universe would come as an infant in an unknown little town named Bethlehem. Some 2,000 years had passed many people still have little idea why they celebrate Christmas. Who cares? It is a time of vacation, family reunion, shopping, gifts and big feast. To us Christians, may our hearts not be dragged away by parties and festivities. On that night, God came down into this world to be with us. Even today, God comes into our everyday lives, and He calls us to participate in His plan. From this well-known Christmas account in Matthew chapter 1, let us learn that God has a plan in all that He does, and He implements His will through the obedience of His people.

EXPLANATION

1. God's Incarnation 神的降生

Christmas is all about Jesus Christ. The one true God became a man. The technical term for the process is called incarnation. In this Matthew passage we notice God's meticulous preparations to achieve His goal. God the Father prepared Jesus to be born in Israel in the first century. God prepared a couple, Joseph and Mary, to become Jesus' earthly parents. But Jesus was not the result of an ordinary marriage. In both **verses 18 and 20**, we are told that Mary was conceived through the work of the Holy Spirit. No one understands how it occurred. I was a biology major in college. I know that there is only one way for a man and a woman to make baby. Some non-believers would argue: "That's impossible! See, the Bible stories are just fairy tales." But the truth is, if there is a supernatural God, then what is impossible with us is possible with Him! Can the Creator of the natural laws overrides the principles He mandates to accomplish His will? Absolutely! Not only did God prepare the future parents for Jesus, He also prepared an angel to

reveal His plan to Joseph. Let us look at **verses 20-21**: 20 ...an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” Matthew gave us a hint why Joseph was chosen as the earthly father of Jesus. Joseph was a descendant of king David from the Old Testament. Why was that significant? The birth of Jesus fulfilled the prophecy in **2 Samuel 7:16** when God told David: “Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.” David’s dynasty came to an end when Babylon defeated Israel in 586 B.C. There was no more king of Israel. Here, God was telling David that a future descendant of his would establish a spiritual and eternal kingdom. Jesus was that coming King. The angel told Joseph that Mary would bear a son. Jesus came as 100% man with flesh and blood like us. It is not like a sci-fi movie where a scary alien creature burst out from someone’s belly. But even when Jesus was born as a man, He is still 100% God. The angel told Joseph that God had prepared a name for this future son. He would be called Jesus, which means “Jehovah is salvation.” At that time people only had one name. It is not like us who have a first and last names. Jesus was His name. Christ was a title. Technically, His name should be Jesus the Christ. It is like the ancient Egyptian kings who were called Pharaohs and the Roman Emperors who were called Caesars. “Christ” means the anointed one. In the Biblical world, when a Jewish king or prophet was inaugurated, a priest would smear oil on his head to bless the person. Therefore, the title “Christ” can be understood as a king. The angel went on to reveal that Jesus came into the world to “save his people from their sins.” Jesus’ arrival fulfilled yet another Old Testament prophecy. Let us look at **verse 23**: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” – which means, “God with us.” God gave this prophecy to Isaiah some 700 years before Jesus was born. We can compare the Matthew passage with **Isaiah 7:14** – “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.” Matthew explained that the name “Immanuel” means “God with us.” The word “Immanuel” in the Old Testament is actually a compound Hebrew word that consists of three parts – “im” means “with,” “nu” means “us” and “el” means “a mighty one.” Putting altogether “Immanuel” means “with us is the mighty one.” The title Immanuel tells us a major reason why Jesus became a man. God wanted to be with us. Through incarnation, Jesus entered into our world. It was not an accident or even a backup plan. God never does things randomly. He also has a plan for each of us. Your life is not a series of unrelated and meaningless events. It is not like many people went to school, found a job, married someone and started a family and you went through the same process. In God’s divine plan, He intervenes into your life. It is because God wants you to know Him. Even today, God gives us hints that He is working in our surrounding. You see some people in the news showing extraordinary kindness to strangers. Just recently, a single mom of three kids in Idaho got a brand-new car from an anonymous person after her old car died. You ask: “Where does this selfless love come from?” Some of your former classmates make more money than you. But they struggle a lot in their health and marriage. In comparison, you have a steady income, good relationship with your spouse and kids and a green card. You question: “Why do I walk a different path?” You escaped a serious traffic accident. Your car was totaled but you came out unharmed. You marveled: “Was it fate or my luck?” In all these and many other life experiences, Jesus is drawing your attention. He is present in our world. He wants to come into your life just like He came into the world some 2,000 years ago. Are you willing to accept Him?

2. God's Invitation 神的邀請

God has a plan in all that He does, and He implements His will through the obedience of His people. On the first Christmas night Jesus' incarnation took place. God became a man. God could have accomplished His will alone. But He invited His people to get involved in His work. In this passage, most obviously, God invited Joseph and Mary to participate in His plan. But they had some major obstacles to overcome. Let us look at **verse 18** again: ...His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. In nowadays term, we say that Mary and Joseph had been engaged. At that time, people were engaged a year before the wedding. After that, the future groom would spend time to prepare his home, a dowry for his bride, the ceremony and the banquet. At that time an engagement was a done deal to the Jews. Even though the bride and the groom still lived in their parents' home they were considered as a couple. Sadly, in our modern days, having a baby and marriage can be viewed as independent matters. But in the first century Jewish world, pregnancy before marriage was a sin punishable by death. Also, calling off a wedding after engagement would bring shame to the families on both sides. Joseph had a few options. He could have exposed the issue and condemned Mary for having relationship with another man. Joseph could also have remained silent and married Mary. But the passage tells us that Joseph was a righteous man, which implies that he was faithful to follow the Law. Joseph pondered on a third option to dissolve the marriage quietly. In doing so, the publicity and damages to both families would be kept at a minimal. Then an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him where the pregnancy came about and God's salvation plan. How did Joseph react? **Verses 24-25** tell us: 24 When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. 25 But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus. Joseph submitted to God's command and took Mary as his wife. Matthew specified that the couple did not have any intimate relationship before Jesus was born. There is no ambiguity that the baby did not come from Joseph. Therefore, in strict sense, Joseph only adopted Jesus as his son. Another gospel writer Luke told us the dilemma Mary faced. An angel appeared to comfort Mary in **Luke 1:30-31**: 30 ... "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. 31 You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus." If Joseph was embarrassed by a pregnant fiancée, Mary would be scared to death for carrying a child while she was still single. The angel told Mary that she had found favor with God. It literally means that God's grace was upon her. When God calls you to do something, it is a special privilege. Don't say to yourself: "Why am I in such a bad luck?" Don't tell God: "You may as well find someone else." Mary did not understand how she could be pregnant with a child before marrying someone. The angel encouraged Mary in **Luke 1:35**: ..."The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God." What God was asking Mary for was a willing heart to be used as a vessel of His grace. God would empower Mary to finish what He intended her to do. Just like Joseph did, Mary submitted to God's invitation. **Luke 1:38** read: "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her. In the Bible, God called many servants who were unknown people in their world. Moses was an eighty-year-old man, David was the youngest among his siblings and he was a shepherd boy, and four of Jesus' disciples were fishermen. Three women are included in Jesus' genealogy in Matthew chapter 1. Tamar went beyond her social obligation and carried twin boys to continue the lineage of her late husband. Ruth and Bathsheba were both Gentile women. All these ladies, Mary

included, were faithful to God's assignments. Little did they know that God accomplished big plans out of their submission. What is God calling you to do now? It may be something different from the social norm. It may be something that brings inconvenience to you. No, God may not call everyone to be a missionary to serve in a foreign country. He may ask you to share the gospel to a classmate or your supervisor whom no one likes to get close to. He may ask you to knock on a neighbor's door to care for a family of a single mom with little kids or an elderly person who lives alone. No matter what it is, God is looking for a willing heart. He will give you the ability and resource. Therefore, do not look down on yourself and conclude that: "I am still young. I don't have much money or experience. I am only a housewife or a retiree. I don't speak perfect English." Through the angel, God encouraged Joseph and Mary with the same message: "Do not be afraid!" God may ask you to do something you have never done before. Do not be afraid. God will minister His grace to you and give you assurance through His Word.

CONCLUSION

God has a plan in all that He does, and He implements His will through the obedience of His people. That is the Christmas account based on the Bible. Jesus came into this world and came into your world. God is with us. He does not hold a remote control and direct everything from heaven. Because Jesus became a human, He fully understands the struggles you go through. You may have watched one of those weight loss reality shows before. The participants were tortured by their trainers to get lean. A TV show called "Fit to Fat to Fit" puts a little twist to the pursuit of becoming thin. Ten personal trainers had to gain extra weight first before working out alongside with their clients to shed the additional pounds. One of the fitness coach JJ gained 60 pounds through an unhealthy diet and but he was not allowed to go to the gym like he often does. He then realized that he did not only suffer from the inconvenience of being over-weight. The impact was also mental and emotional. He cried on most days and signs of depression appeared. JJ helped a contestant named Ray in his weight loss journey. At the end, Ray lost more than one-third of his original 390-pound body. The trainer and the trainee became an inspiration to each other. JJ had a deeper understanding of what an obese person went through. Ray felt a strong sense of compassion from his coach. Our Lord Jesus went through a similar course. He became a man first before He saved the mankind. Jesus knew how hard it was to live as a person. But most importantly, Jesus felt the impact of sin on us. This Christmas baby came to save you. Do you need His salvation? First of all, you have to humbly admit that you are a sinner. Then you open your heart and accept Jesus as your Savior and Lord by faith. This is the biggest gift Jesus has prepared for you on this Christmas.