

# EARTHLY SCANDAL & HEAVENLY GLORY

by **David Lee Burris**



## GOD WITH US

“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall call his name Immanuel.”

MATTHEW 1:23



**Among the many ironies of the incarnation is the irony that the Son of God came into the world in such a way that it could not help but be scandalous. He began his life among us with scandal just as surely as he ended it with scandal. Not only is there the scandal of the cross, but there is also the scandal of the birth.**

## THE SCANDAL OF HIS BIRTH –

**Mary's Baby Bump.** 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. Her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.

What's going on here? Two facts are clear: Mary is "with child," and consequently Joseph doesn't want to be with her. What is not clear, however (at least not to some modern readers), is how Joseph can be called Mary's "husband" when they are not yet married, and how they are not yet married, but Joseph can divorce her.

The key to solving these riddles is grasping the cultural context. At this time and place in history, "marriage was held to be," as William Barclay somewhat smugly suggests, **"far too serious a step to be left to the dictates of the human heart."** As it was for most couples in this culture, Mary and Joseph's parents had likely arranged their marriage.

Here's how it worked. **First**, the fathers of the two families would *engage* the couple. This would usually happen in childhood. **Second**, later in life, this couple would become *betrothed*. The girl was usually a teenager, and the man was usually older. So, to be clear, their **betrothal is not the same as our engagement**. Rather, betrothal was the nearest step to marriage. It was the process of ratifying the engagement into which the couple had previously entered.

During the engagement period, the young woman could break the agreement if she was unwilling to marry the man. Conversely, the man could break off the engagement if the woman had not kept her virginity.

But once they entered betrothal (which lasted one year), it was absolutely binding. During that year, although they did not live together or sleep together, the couple was actually known as "husband and wife."

This explains why Joseph is called Mary's "husband" (v. 19). Now here's the final point of clarification: the only way a betrothal could be broken would be through a legal divorce, which explains what Joseph was up to in verse 19.

**So then, do you see the scandal of it all? Mary is pregnant. Yet she is betrothed to Joseph. Joseph isn't the father of this baby. Now, if this scenario is still scandalous in our anything-goes, play-by-your-own-rules culture, imagine how it would have been in their anything-doesn't-go, abide-by-God's-rules culture.**

Mary was in a tough spot. Matthew reminds us that Joseph's spot wasn't any softer. Mary was the woman whom he agreed to love, the woman who was to have his children. And she was found out!

She was found to be with child, and thus with the apparent stain of sexual sin. Worse than that, this baby was not his, biologically speaking. He hadn't touched her. He knew that. This could only mean that somebody else had.

Stop and think about this. Walk a moment in his shoes. Breathe the air he was breathing. How would you feel if you were in his situation? Would you be humiliated or angry or jealous? Matthew does not tell us how Joseph felt. But it is difficult to imagine him so stoic that these emotions never entered his heart.

So, what did he do? What could he do? What would you do?

He thought seriously and patiently about the matter, and then he "resolved" to do what was best for both persons: "And... Joseph, being a **just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.**"

Being a just man, he could not simply disregard God's Law (see [Deuteronomy 22:23](#)), and to marry Mary would have been to do just that. It would have been to overlook an offense that God's Word says should not be overlooked. In fact, **it would have been to admit guilt when he was not guilty. In a sense, it would be to lie—"Yes, it's my child; shame on us."**

I envision the weight of this decision in this way. On one shoulder Joseph has the righteous requirements of God's Law whispering in his ear, "You have to expose her error. This sin can't go unpunished." On the other shoulder is the compassion and mercy of God's Law (cf. 23:23). (And note here that it's not a devil and an angel but *two angels wrestling with his heart*.) Compassion counsels him, "Joseph, a private divorce is the way to proceed. **Dismiss her quietly. In this way you show both the justice and the love of God.**"

**Method & Purpose.** God did not appear to the whole village of Nazareth—let alone the whole nation of Israel—to announce the miraculous conception of a baby destined to be the Son of God. No, God sent the angel Gabriel with a private message for one young woman's ears only. Surely **God understood the implications of what He was doing and how He was doing it.**

**God was setting Mary up for sexual scandal!** What rational person would not justifiably conclude that a young pregnant woman who was betrothed but unmarried had been sexually unrighteous? God could have prevented that. He could have let the whole village in on the secret. He could've vindicated Mary by making it clear to everyone that He, the Creator of the universe, was responsible for her pregnancy. But He did not. He left her in a condition where shame and dishonor in the eyes of her neighbors would be the inevitable result. In this honor-shame society in an honor-shame human world - **Why did God do that?**

I can only speculate, of course. But I have to wonder whether God was not **setting up an act that would anticipate what was to come.** The chronology of the events around Jesus' birth is incomplete, and so it is difficult to give an exact, detailed account of what happened when. What follows is my best reconciliation of the accounts in Matthew and Luke.

An angel announces to Zacharias that he and Elizabeth his wife will have a son in their old age. Their son will be the forerunner who will prepare the way for the Messiah. Six months into Elizabeth's pregnancy with the baby who will become John the Baptist, the angel comes privately to Mary, Elizabeth's young cousin, and informs her she will supernaturally conceive a child who will be the promised Messiah, the Son of God.

Almost immediately, Mary travels to visit Elizabeth for about three months. Probably **after the birth of John, Mary, then three months pregnant, returns to her home in Nazareth** where her family and Joseph to whom she's betrothed, await her. In all likelihood, none in Nazareth—including Joseph and her own family—are yet aware that Mary is pregnant.

A little later—the couple still unmarried—it becomes very obvious that the young woman is pregnant. Whatever one might conclude – it does not look good for Mary – there is the definite appearance of sexually immorally. Joseph might be giving second thought to those months Mary was away – whether there is more to that story.

At this point, Joseph's choices and actions become important. We do not know how he learns of Mary's pregnancy. Perhaps he did not know until Mary could no longer hide it. Perhaps, in anticipation, Mary finally had to tell him. However, he found out, now he knew; and he was faced with a choice. I assume that Mary would have tried to tell Joseph the truth, but under the circumstances, **believing Mary's story that she had supernaturally conceived the Son of God was not among the rational option facing Joseph.** Joseph was left with three rational options. (1) He could publicly accuse Mary of sexual immorality and make a public scene of releasing her from their betrothal contract. This option would have put Mary in great jeopardy because the penalty for adultery was death by stoning. (2) Joseph could join Mary in her shame and dishonor and simply proceed with the marriage. The community would assume that the two of them had been sexually inappropriate, even though Joseph knew that he had not been. But he could choose to protect Mary and keep her from harm by joining her in her shame and dishonor. The problem with this second option is that it did not honor righteousness.

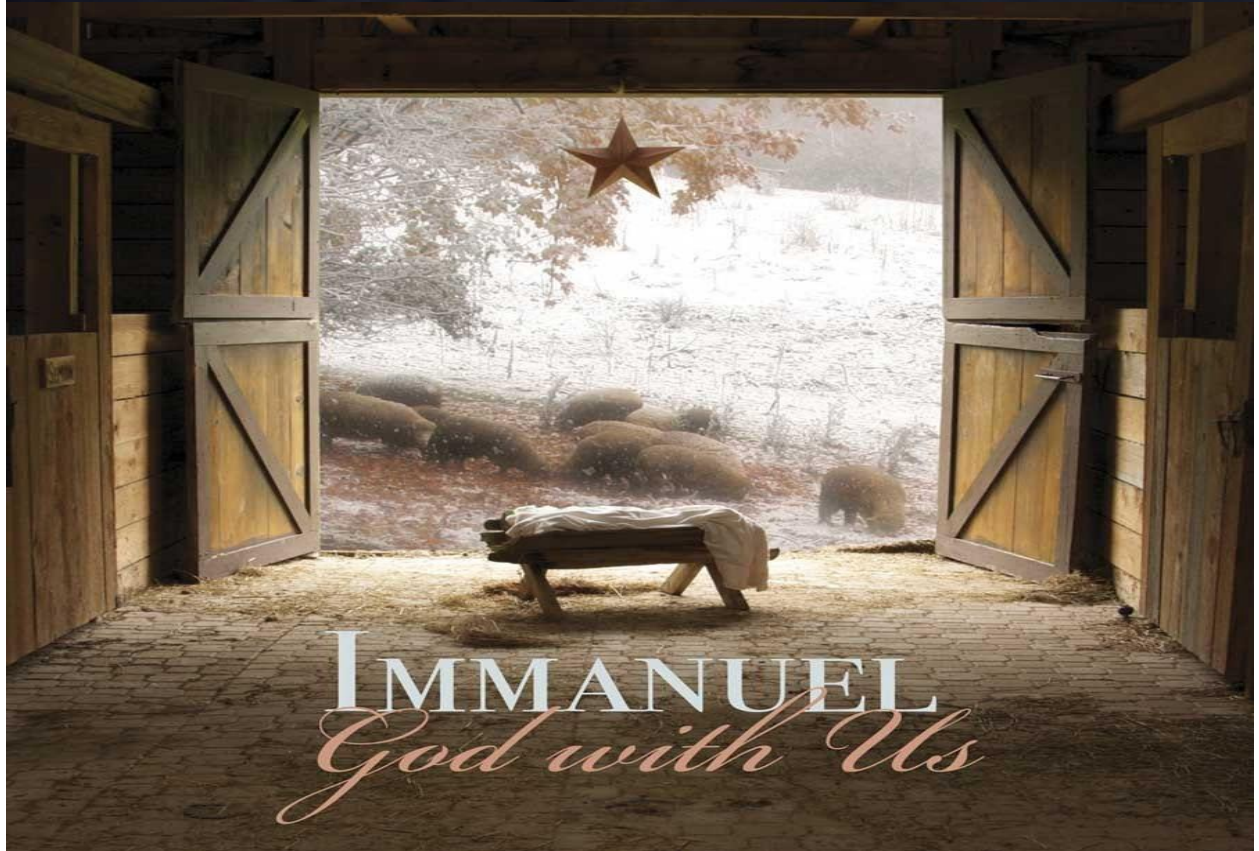
(3) Matthew tells us, Joseph was a righteous man. He tells us that Joseph chose the third possible option—namely, he would respect the Law with regard to sexual righteousness while being as kind as possible to Mary. Thus, he opted to break his betrothal to a woman who—as far as he knew—had demonstrated herself a Law-breaker; but he opted to do so privately and quietly, in a way that would minimize the negative impact on her.

**God Himself Reveals Privately The Plan.** At least, that is what Joseph had opted to do before God came to him in a dream verifying Mary's story. Mary had not broken the Law. Mary had not been sexually immoral. God had chosen Mary for a unique special role: to conceive and give birth to the King of kings while she was still a virgin. The divine instruction to Joseph was to take Mary as his wife.

We have to understand, however, what God was asking of Joseph. In effect, **God was asking Joseph to join Mary in her shame. She was not to bear the inevitable shame and dishonor alone; he was to join her in bearing it.** He was to take Mary as his wife with the inevitable result that their neighbors would believe that the stigma of sexual immorality rested on them both. Joseph had not been sexually immoral; no stigma should justly fall on him. But God asked him to volunteer willingly to bear the perceived sin of Mary on himself, even though it was not his sin. Joseph did just as God instructed. His act was kind, gracious, and heroic. He could have chosen to put his own honor ahead of compassion and separated himself from Mary's shame. But he did not. He chose to bear willingly & heroically Mary's shame along with her, even though it did not justly belong to him.



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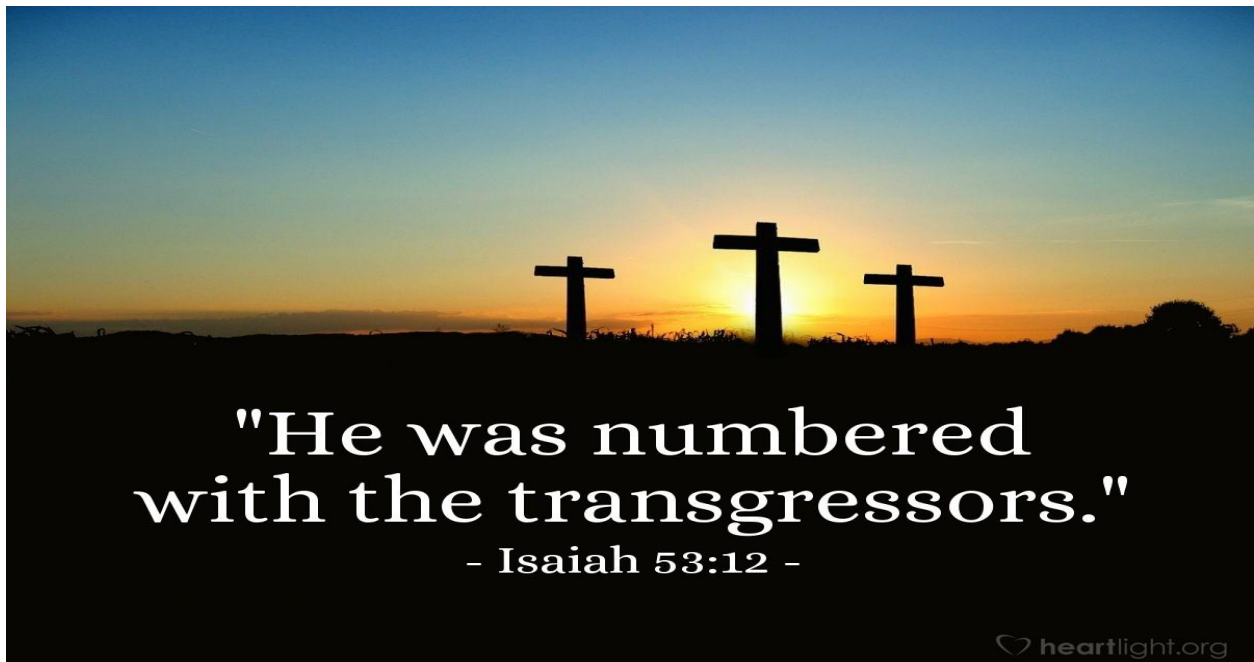


**Everything In Anticipation Of The End Of The Story.**

Note how interestingly Joseph's choice anticipated the most heroic choice that Jesus would perform. The father, Joseph, heroically joined Mary in her shame. The son, Jesus, would one day heroically join every one of us in our shame, when he voluntarily chose his death on the cross.

**God so orchestrated the events surrounding Jesus' birth that Joseph's act, in its own small way, anticipated the heroic act that his son would be called upon to perform. In order for God's saving purposes to be fulfilled, Joseph mercifully had to join a sinner in her shame; he had to bear her shame along with her. Joseph's act is exactly analogous to the central act of God's saving purposes in world history: Jesus mercifully joined us sinners in our shame; he bore our shame along with us.** – Internet Source

THE SCANDAL OF HIS DEATH ~



## Gill's Exposition of the Entire Bible

*and he was reckoned among the transgressors.* The Syriac and Arabic versions read in the first person, "and I shall be reckoned", &c. and so the Persic version, "that I may be numbered", &c. and the Ethiopic renders it, "and the Lord Jesus is numbered with sinners"; neither right: for the words are a proper citation from [Isaiah 53:12](#) which, as the whole prophecy belongs to the Messiah, was fulfilled in Jesus; who, though he was no transgressor, yet being in the likeness of sinful flesh, and dwelling among, and conversing with sinners, was traduced as one, and was joined with Barabbas, a murderer, a thief, and a robber, and put up with him for the people to choose which of the two they would have released; and was at last crucified between two thieves; and more than this, being in the legal place, and stead of his people, and having their sins laid upon him, and imputed to him, he was made and accounted, by imputation, not only a sinner, but sin itself; and as such, was considered in the eye of the law, and by the justice of God, and was treated accordingly; See Gill on [Mark 15:28](#).

for the things concerning me have an end. The Syriac version renders it, "all of them"; or "the whole of it", as the Ethiopic version; all that were concerning him; all the counsels, purposes, and decrees of God, relating to his sufferings and death; to the manner in which his death was brought about, by one of his disciples betraying him; to the several indignities he should be used with, by Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Jews, and Roman soldiers; and to his death itself; all which were by the determinate counsel, and foreknowledge of God, and now were about to have, and quickly had their fulfilling end; as also all his own covenant engagements and agreements he entered into with his Father, to bear the sins of many, to make his soul an offering for sin, to be numbered with transgressors, and pour out his soul unto death; **and likewise all the types and shadows of the law, all sacrifices in general, and the daily sacrifice in particular, with the passover, brazen serpent, and other things, even the whole law, both moral and ceremonial, had their full and final accomplishment in him; together with all the prophecies of the Old Testament relating to this matter, particularly [Genesis 3:15](#).**

**Why did God order it that His beloved Son should be crucified between two criminals? Certainly, God had a reason; a good one, a manifold one, whether we can discern it or not. God never acts arbitrarily. He has a good purpose for everything He does, for all His works are ordered by infinite wisdom. In this particular instance a number of answers suggest themselves to our inquiry. Was not our blessed Lord crucified with the two thieves to fully demonstrate the unfathomable depths of shame into which He had descended? At His birth he was surrounded by the beasts of the field, and now, at His death, He is numbered with the refuse of humanity.**

**Again, was not the Savior numbered with the transgressors to show us the position He occupied as our substitute? He had taken the place which was due us, and what was that but the place of shame, the place of transgressors, the place of criminals condemned to death! - Article Excerpt**

- ✚ He was numbered with transgressors in public reputation.
  - ✚ He was numbered with transgressors in the courts of law.
  - ✚ The whole mob numbered Him with transgressors when He was on trial.
  - ✚ He bears the transgressor's scourging.
  - ✚ He also bears the felon's cross.
- From: Spurgeon's Sermon On Isaiah 53**

- ✚ He trades places so He could better become the transgressor's advocate.
- ✚ He trades places that He might plead with the transgressor.
- ✚ He trades places so that sinners may feel drawn to Him.
- ✚ He on the transgressor's list that we might be written in the roll of saints.
- ✚ He trades places to challenge Justice.

