

**Sunday School Lesson**  
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21 she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

23 "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel"

(which means, God with us). 24 When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took his wife, 25 but knew her not until she had borne a son; and he called his name Jesus.

**Memory Selection:**

She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. —Matthew 1:21

**Exploring The Questions**

Before we discuss further the questions raised at the beginning of this session, we should be clear in our understanding of the ideas Matthew wanted to get over to the Jews.

The idea behind the word "betrothed" (verse 18) is a strange one to an American audience. When Americans think of marriage, they think of the "ideal" of television and the movies; that is, that a boy and girl fall in love and, following a brief or long courtship, they get married and live happily for the rest of their lives.

This "ideal" had no place in the marriage customs in the days of Joseph and Mary. Marriage took place in three steps. While the future bride and groom were still children, the parents might "engage" them, even though they had never seen each other. When they were old enough to think of marriage, they entered a period of time, lasting for one year, called the "betrothal."

Before the betrothal, the bride could break the engagement if she did not wish to go through with the marriage. But after the betrothal was made, it would only be ended by divorce. In spite of the fact that the couple did not live together, they were known as husband and wife. The only way to end a betrothal was by divorce. Only the man could get the divorce.

At the end of the year of betrothal, the marriage itself took place. The marriage ceremony was quite simple. The only religious part of the rite was pronouncement of a blessing over the bride by her parents. Since Jewish marriages were often completed when the couple was still young, Joseph and Mary may have been only in their teens.

One of the questions that divides students of the Bible is how to understand miracles and the fulfillment of prophecies.

In writing this lesson I do not intend to advocate one viewpoint over another; my effort

will be made to outline both "conservative" and "liberal" viewpoints. Those who favor one viewpoint will have an opportunity to learn something about the other. Persons of all views should learn to accept other persons, even though they disagree with their viewpoint.

How free do members of your group feel to discuss differences of opinion among yourselves? Is there one person in the group who always has the "last word" when you are dealing with differences? Someone has said that we do not truly understand the viewpoint of another person until we can argue his case as effectively as he can. Do you feel you know the viewpoints you disagree with that well?

Do you think the church school is a good place to talk about differences in views? Do you think all controversy should be omitted from the church? If the church school is to truly be a school, what should the sessions be like?

**Finding Help**

**With Your Questions**

Our procedure now shall be as follows. We shall first summarize what may be called the "conservative" view of the fulfillment of prophecy. Then we shall summarize the "liberal" view. In each case, we shall try to state these summaries as clearly and sympathetically as their own advocates would. We shall then discuss some pertinent issues on which both groups may agree.

As I have already stated, the writer of the Gospel of Matthew believed that fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies would influence Jews to accept

Jesus as the Messiah.

The Jews were hoping for a Messiah who would come to restore the nation to its golden age. Many of them searched the Scriptures to discover what to expect in the Messiah. (Remember: only the Law — the first five books of the Old Testament — and the Prophets had been accepted as Scriptures at the time of Jesus; see, for instance, Matthew 7:12 and 22:40.)

Why did not the Jews accept Jesus as the Messiah? One reason was that they hoped for a political Messiah who would free them from Rome. Because Jesus did not become such a savior, they rejected him. Another reason was closely related to it: that is, they did not believe the Messiah would suffer and die, as Jesus did. We may recall from the Gospels that Jesus' own disciples rejected this idea.

Matthew, then, was determined to show the Jews how Jesus had fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies. If Jesus had done what the Old Testament books had prophesied that the Messiah would do, then the Jews ought to accept Matthew's claim that he was the Messiah.

In the early church, evangelists, missionaries, and teachers used this same method to win converts. They pointed out that

Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection were foretold by the prophets and psalmists. Many persons became Christians because they were convinced of the validity of the church's claim for Jesus.

In our own time, many persons feel that the fulfillment of prophecy is one of the strongest and most secure evidences of Christian truth.

**Two Viewpoints**

Let us look a little closer at this teaching. According to this "conservative" view, the fulfilled prophecy is an evidence or witness of a super-natural person who is making himself known by these means. The individual who believes God uses this method to win over his people does not ask "why" God has acted in this way. He simply sees that, from Genesis 3:15 on through the rest of the Bible, prophecies have been uttered and many have been fulfilled.

To return to the New Testament Scripture for this lesson, this person feels that the birth of Jesus can be accepted as reliable because he accepts the prophetic Scripture of the Book of Isaiah as God's message.

At the same time, this conservative viewpoint does not wish to downgrade the work of the Holy Spirit. Even in the Virgin Birth, he wishes the emphasis

to be placed on the Spirit, not on the Virgin. He believes that the validity of the prophetic message is found in the fulfillment of prophecy. If an event comes to pass as the prophet foretold, then that prophet must be speaking from God.

The liberal point of view moves from several different assumptions. One is that the Bible is self-authenticating in a spiritual sense but not in a literal sense. That is, even if it later could be proved that certain prophecies were not fulfilled, the Bible would have lost none of its value.

Another liberal attitude is that Christian evidences such as a prophecy and miracles are ineffective before faith and of no use after one has faith. Still another view is that such an attitude toward prophecy as that held by the conservative makes the prophet a servant of later ages but not of his own. These persons would contend that a great deal of prophecy is poetry, that its major purpose was to change the attitudes and actions of its first listeners and hearers (rather than some later generation).

The liberal person would say that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are the evidence of his place as the Son of God.

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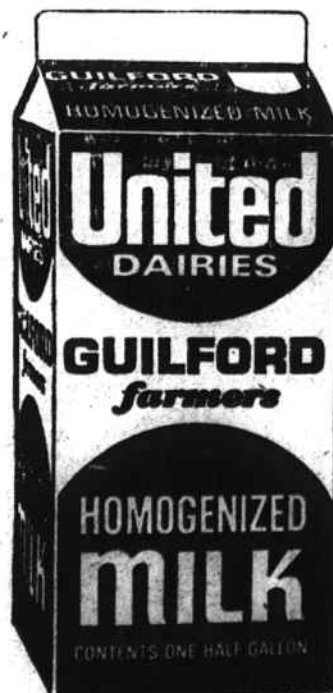
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