

## **What Child is This?**

### **Part One- Mary: What to Expect When Expecting God**

**December 1, 2024**  
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#### ***Matthew 1:1-19***

#### **Intro: Expecting**

Christmas has the potential to bring some of our greatest joys but also some of our most profound disappointments, because Christmas is a season of expectations.

A popular saying in addiction recovery programs is: “expectations are premeditated resentments.”

When Christmases go wrong—with sickness, family issues or whatever—we are more disappointed than if a normal day goes wrong. Why? Due to our expectations.

For some of us, we have resentments towards God because of our expectations of Him. We expected healings or miracles, or we expected certain feelings and they didn’t come.

Mary must have had expectations. Mary must have had feelings. We will explore these in Matthew 1:1-19 and we will learn:

*Our expectations for God should come from the Story of God.*

#### **What To Expect When Expecting God: Unusual Suspects**

Mary is pregnant and engaged. We know this is by the Holy Spirit, but other people don’t. At worst, this means Mary has committed adultery and deserves to be stoned to death. But the practice in her day was public humiliation. At best, it means a quiet divorce and a low chance of ever marrying, living as a marked woman in a rural town.

This does not sound like the type of situation we would expect God to put us in.

Often our disappointment with God has to do with the things we expected to feel. We expected a story without troubles or ambiguity.

Mary could carry on in this situation with these feelings because she knew her history.

A crucial distinction between resilient saints and wishy-washy Christians who limp between opinions is a deep knowledge of sacred history. Far from being a ‘roadmap for life’ or a set of ‘universal principles’ the Scriptures we have inherited are the real lives of real people who came face to face with a very real God.

Four names that stand out in Matthew’s genealogy are Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba. One is a woman who posed as a sex worker to get an heir from her father-in-law (Genesis 38). Another is actually a sex worker who became a spy that helped Israel into the promised land—which also, spoilers, she doesn’t really belong in this list, so Matthew is probably really wanting you to pay attention to her (Joshua 2). Another is a woman who lost everything and came to a foreign land to work as a day laborer (Ruth). Another is, and there’s debate here, an adulterer and willing accomplice to her husband’s murder, or the victim of the abuse of a powerful man (2 Samuel 11).

These are not the stories celebrity Christians share on Instagram.

We are all the unusual suspects in surprising circumstances when it comes to the Story of God breaking into our lives. When we have expectations, we must learn to interrogate them against what has been revealed through the Scriptures.

### **What To Expect When Expecting God: Impossible Births**

The virgin birth is often argued about apologetically or philosophically. We sometimes miss what it is doing as part of a pattern in scripture.

In some key moments in Israel's history, God would miraculously give a child at the start of something new. Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 12, 15, 18, 21), Hannah and Elkanah (1 Samuel 1) and Mary's own cousin Elizabeth (Luke 1) follow this pattern.

Perhaps, because a new child brings new possibility. We all have hopes that the next generation will go further than us.

But there is perhaps an even deeper reason for this theme. In Genesis after the fall Adam and Eve are cursed. Eve's curse reads this way in the NIV:

*"I will make your pains in childbearing very severe;*

*with painful labor you will give birth to children.*

*Your desire will be for your husband,*

*and he will rule over you."*

Scholars and some good bibles will point to a translational difficulty in the first line. The word for 'childbearing' is never used to mean carrying children or giving birth. It's used of *conception*. The word for 'pains' is almost always used of emotional turmoil.

Some say a possibility is "I will increase your anxiety about conception." John Walton comments:

"This includes anxiety about whether she will be able to conceive a child, anxiety that comes with all the physical discomfort of pregnancy, anxiety concerning the health of the child in the womb, and anxiety about whether she and the baby will survive the birth process."<sup>1</sup>

Adam and Eve were both cursed to 'toil', not to receive the fruits of their labor. For those who have struggled with fertility or lost children, this reminds us that it is the world's brokenness and not our personal brokenness at play. It also shows us that the pain of wanting a child is one of the most well documented in scripture.

Matthew's gospel in Greek reads "the genesis of Jesus the Messiah." The virgin birth is an intensification of the theme of God 'opening wombs' in the Old Testament. The Spirit hovering over the waters of Chaos (Genesis 1:1) mirrored by hovering over Mary the virgin. Jesus is the New Adam. It sets an incredible expectation for this child.

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<sup>1</sup> John H. Walton, *NIV Application: Genesis*, pg. 227.

### **Conclusion: Expect Love**

With the miracles in Scripture, it sometimes helps to go from asking 'why not me' to 'what's it for?' Many of the miracles of scripture are 'double-edged'. Mary is told in Luke:

*"This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."*

That sword, many think, is the pain of watching her child on a cross. Or, perhaps, some have guessed Mary had her own moment of doubt in Jesus' mission. Or maybe it was just the great intensification of the pain of all parents, when they realize their child—their heart walking outside of their bodies—wasn't for them but for the whole world.

Yes, joy and disappointment hold hands when we follow God. But those contradictions and paradoxes fall under the greatest thing we know we can expect from God. The thing that believes all things, bears all things and hopes all things.

We can expect Love. Because, as Jesus teaches us, Love endures all these things to give Himself for others.

Like a parent holding their child out for someone else, so Mary is called to hold Jesus out to us. And this moment is the Father holding the Son out to the world.

But, this 'holding out' is not just for us to receive. Augustine, a fourth century pastor, once said that the church is both Christ's bride and His mother.<sup>2</sup> We are called, like Mary, to hold out Christ to the world. To bear Him into each new circumstance. To hold out our hearts to a hurting world.

So, yes, expect all the feelings that would come with that difficult mission. But, most of all, expect the God of Love to meet you there.

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<sup>2</sup> Augustine, *Sermo 25, 7-8: PL 46, 937-938.*

## **Life Group Discussion and Reflection:**

### **Open Up**

When have you experienced high expectations that are crushed? How did it feel?

### **Dig In**

Reread Matthew 1:1-19

- What has been your understanding of the virgin birth? How might reading it through the lens of all scripture amplify its importance?
- When has God's call on your life put you in situations that were uncomfortable?
- What longstanding resentments might you have towards God?
- Consider the list of names in the genealogy, are there any players there who might speak to any of those resentments you feel? What other stories, poems, or proverbs do you rely on in Scripture for comfort when you're disappointed?
- How can we let Scripture form our expectations for God?

### **Prayer**

Ask God to let His story shape our expectations. Pray specifically for anything sensitive shared within the group regarding disappointments and resentments.