

What Were They Thinking? : Joseph
By Jason Huff
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Isaiah 26:3-9, Psalm 126, Matthew 1:18-25

Today's final Scripture lesson comes from Matthew 1:18-25. Listen now to God's Word. "This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: 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. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, 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. 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." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" -- which means, "God with us." When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus."

Last week, I was glad that our friend Kelly was able to start our Advent series. When I listened to her sermon, I was struck by her first line: what was God thinking? She looked at that question through the eyes of Mary. Today we're going to look at the story through Joseph's eyes. And as I studied his story this week, I wonder if he didn't ask the same question... what was God thinking?

In the grand scheme of things, Joseph rarely gets much of a mention. In Catholicism, Mary is lifted up as second only to the triune God Himself, perhaps the closest ordinary human being there ever was to divine. She bore the Son of the Father in her womb and carried Him for nine months. She was called "favored one" by the angel Gabriel who visited her. But Joseph? He's another story. He's the secondary player, the step-father to Jesus. His importance is often limited to the Christmas story. While the Catholic church has made him a saint and given him a feast day and so on, no one in the world prays, "Hail Joseph, full of grace" every day.

But what's interesting to me is that Joseph's role is just as big as Mary's as far as the gospels are concerned. Luke's gospel tells us half the story; it's where we get Mary's perspective. But the gospel of Matthew doesn't have insights from Mary; instead, it has them from Joseph. And the picture Matthew paints is about a man whose struggles are very real even today and whose choices show us a life dedicated to God's calling.

Scripture tells us that Joseph was a carpenter. What was it like to be a carpenter in the first century? He might have helped make homes, but not as we think of them. Homes in first century Palestine were usually built out of stone, with wooden beams used primarily to support the roof. Only the rich had the money for tables and wooden doors, and you wouldn't find the rich in a backwater village like Nazareth. Joseph probably fashioned yokes both for oxen and for people to carry their goods. As a skilled artisan, he would have been considered part of the middle class...but again, that simply meant they had enough money to eat twice a day.

As a middle-class man in 1st century Israel, Joseph probably had simple aspirations...to marry, to have a family and provide for them, to study the Torah, to follow the law of the LORD and to teach it to his children, to lead his family and community in worshipping the one true God. We know some of those details because Matthew uses a term that doesn't get used to describe all that many people...Joseph is called "righteous." He desired to live a life pleasing to God. He wanted to be a man after God's own heart like his ancestor, King David. His goal in life was the pursuit of his Creator.

From everything we know, Joseph had done precisely that. He had worked hard and established himself to the point where he could take a bride. He was engaged to Mary, a young woman who was known for her own devotion to God. In the words of Yente the matchmaker from **Fiddler on the Roof**, "a good match." There would be no question that the center of their relationship would be God, who would see them through the hardships of rural Palestine. Their betrothal meant that in the eyes of the community, they were as good as married; all that awaited was the ceremony and the children that would inevitably follow. A hard, simple, but godly life.

But then comes the announcement – Mary's pregnant. Joseph is a righteous man; the child is not his. This is not like Mary at all. What happened? And moreover, what did Joseph do to deserve this? A faithful man, a righteous man – does he deserve for his bride, someone he's probably known all his life, to betray him? We're not even certain that it was Mary who told Joseph. We know from Luke's gospel that Mary went to visit her cousin Elizabeth when she found out the news. Did news travel from the hill country of Judea back to Joseph that his bride had been unfaithful? Was he the last to know? We don't know how long it was before the angel came to him and confirmed the truth. How many sleepless nights did Joseph face, angry, sad, and devastated that the life he had planned was not the way things would be?

We know what those dark nights of the soul look like when life seems to fall apart. Many of us are glad that our friend Norm has gone to be with his Lord, and yet we still grieve for our friend Phyllis and her loss...and our own losses. We have seen friends, dear friends, leave this church in the last year, some moving to new homes in other states, others looking for something we wish we could offer but can't. We see familiar faces visit our food pantry and wonder if we will need help soon ourselves. Each of us has that lonely, bitter, fearful place in our hearts where we feel our dreams go to die. We dare not stay there too long for fear that those broken dreams might consume us.

In the midst of this pain, Joseph stays faithful to God. The choice he makes is one that combines righteousness with mercy. Under Jewish law, Joseph could have insisted Mary be stoned. Technically, Roman law forbid the Jews from carrying out their own justice, but Rome's hand didn't always extend very far into the boonies of Israel. Some might have even thought that righteous demanded it. But Joseph also wants mercy for her. Not only does he not want her death, he doesn't want her publically disgraced. By planning to divorce her quietly, he would be within the bounds of the law without doing damage to his own righteousness. He also made it possible that she might, perhaps, have another chance to have a good life. In the absence of clear direction from God, in the midst of his own suffering, Joseph makes a hard call that would have honored God, honored himself, and even honored Mary.

When confronted with difficult decisions, with ethical dilemmas, with moral choices, when God is not speaking directly into our ears, what road might we walk down? Joseph's decision is a marker for our paths. Because many times, the way ahead is not clear. We are confronted with our fears and pains and often, our first thoughts are to fall back, or worse, depending on the situation, to seek our own gratification, our own pleasure, our own revenge. The other day I gave a long, loud honk on the horn because a car dangerously cut me off. Both of the boys had never seen me do that, and Cameron asked, "Daddy...what that?" And I realized that in my anger, I expressed my frustration rather than grace. That car ride home and the conversation we had made me realize how my actions are a model for my children and how careful I need to be. Joseph was saddened, angry, and he had no word from the LORD. Yet he didn't react in anger. He made the best plan possible based on his knowledge of God's ways. I need to do that. We all do.

Then there's a sudden change of events. An angel appears to Joseph in a dream and sorts things out. He explains to Joseph what Gabriel had said in person to Mary. But what strikes me is this: we're told that the angel commanded Joseph to take Mary as his wife. Here's what's unique: the angel's literal words are, "Do not be afraid to take Mary home." The angel is not a taskmaster nor a drill sergeant. He says, "Do not fear."

Those words must have struck home to Joseph. He was righteous, yes. He was merciful. And yet this carpenter, this man of God, he was afraid. Afraid of what? Afraid of what people might say? Perhaps more than we know. No one would stone him. But they might not buy his plows and yokes. They might find someone else to buy their wood from. His righteousness would no longer be acknowledged by his friends and neighbors, only whispers about his lack of self-control. Careful readings of the Scriptures show that the Pharisees knew enough about Jesus to try and imply He was born through sexual immorality. Joseph's own righteous actions, the actions he was being told to take by a messenger from God, would be seen as proof of his moral failings. And I don't know about you, but my dreams are pretty weird. I take them with a grain of salt. Joseph didn't even get the luxury of meeting an angel in person; he had to believe that what he experienced wasn't just indigestion!

Yet Joseph believed. He stood firm. He did what he knew was right by the LORD. He took Mary as his bride. He took care of her, taking her along with him to Bethlehem for the census rather than for her to have to face alone those who refused to believe or understand. He later has another dream telling him to take Jesus and Mary to Egypt when King Herod becomes insane with rage that the messiah has been born. Once again, his family probably thought he was crazy, but he obeyed. And then, until his death many years later, Joseph became Jesus' dad. In a world where kinship meant everything, where blood was blood and family was family and Jesus was not his flesh and blood, Joseph raised Him as his own. Those who knew Jesus growing up knew Him as Joseph's son.

We know Joseph's dilemma all too well. We too must answer the question: do we fear God, or do we fear other people's opinions of us? Because our world isn't very accepting of biblical morality. Tell someone you are a Christian and you are no longer you in their eyes – you become their perception of what a Christian is, filtered through whatever lenses they have of Christianity. Most of them aren't favorable.

To be a Christian is not fashionable. In fact, some don't even consider it moral to be a Christian. Christians are believed to be quaint at best, but often are seen as anti-intellectual, easily led sheep full of judgment and hate and hypocrisy. Christian righteousness is laughed at in some quarters; in others, it's ridiculed as out of touch. And the last thing any of us wants is to be rejected. We want to be loved and accepted. Our fears of rejection are real and it hurts when it happens. It's one thing when a stranger on the street looks at you funny for being a Christian. It's another when it's someone close to you. Joseph knew that taking Mary as his wife wouldn't bring him rejection from some nameless, faceless Roman soldier; it meant rejection from his cousin Eli and his neighbor Abraham and his nephew Joshua. And so it is with us. We are sometimes rejected by those who are closest to us, who we trust the most, sometimes even those who have walked alongside us in faith. And the sting goes deep.

Yet Joseph showed unwavering trust. He obeyed. He followed. In his own willingness to lose his status as a righteous man in the community, in his readiness to become nothing in order to become the earthly father of Jesus the Messiah, his life is a shining reflection of his adopted Son, the One who made everything and had everything and ruled everything who nevertheless became nothing in order to save us.

My friends, let us trust in the LORD. When we ask God, "why me?," let us ask, "Why not me?" In our sufferings and sorrows, in following Him when it hurts, God teaches us and shapes us; He grows us into the people He intends us to be, faithful and righteous, holy and merciful, loving and kind. When others reject you or scorn you for holding firm to your faith, when life falls apart before your very eyes when you are doing your level best to walk in God's ways, do not fear. God is with you. God loves you. God cherishes you as a son, as a daughter. Do not fear. Listen to the words of Peter from his first letter: "For a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith -- of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire -- may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed." Let God refine you even in the hard times of life.

You might not face suffering. Instead, you may find that your role in life may not seem so important to others. Like Joseph, you might feel like you are destined to wind up a minor character in your own story. Perhaps the good you do goes unnoticed, unseen, unappreciated; perhaps you do what you do so well that everyone just expects that's the way things are rather than recognizing your talents. But remember the encouragement of Jesus in Matthew 6 – our heavenly Father sees what we do in secret and will reward us for those things we do in His name, no matter if anyone else ever notices. Don't give up following the Messiah and serving Him in exchange for earthly praise. Follow the path laid out before you in Scripture, knowing that God is pleased with your faithfulness.

When you look carefully at Scripture, we find that we don't actually have a single word written down that was uttered by Joseph. But his actions in the midst of uncertainty and doubt speak volumes to us. May we hear that voice speak to us in our own day, in our own trials, in our silences, and may we claim the same righteousness of the man who through his obedience to God became the earthly father of our Savior and Lord.