

## Curveball Christmas

Matthew 1:18-25

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Many baseball players can hit a fastball a long way. I couldn't hit a fastball, but people with a better eye, better reflexes, better coordination and more talent can. Most of these players never make it to the Major Leagues. Part of the reason is that they were unable to adjust to the curveball and other off-speed offerings from a pitcher.

Life is the same way. We would like it to be straight and level, but life often comes into our lives as a curveball. It may be a change in plans, an unexpected illness, the death of someone we love, the loss of a job, a household fire, the end of a marriage, a surprise pregnancy, or any number of other things. In life, as in professional baseball, you better be able to handle the curveballs.

This year, in our Christmas Series of sermons, we will look at very familiar characters, but we will be looking at how they handled the times of crisis in their lives. Christmas, for each of these people, was a time of crisis. We will see that God calls ordinary people, sometimes even those despised by the world, to be His agents of grace in this world. God uses ordinary people in extraordinary ways. I hope each account will help us appreciate the Christmas story in a new way and remind you that there is no reason God cannot also use you in some extraordinary way.

This morning, we look at Joseph, the man Jesus called "Dad." Not much of Joseph is known other than his genealogy and what is recorded in the birth narrative. It seems certain that Joseph died before Jesus began His ministry. From Luke, we know Joseph was still alive when Jesus was around 13 (when He was left behind in Jerusalem.) Joseph served well, but it wasn't easy getting to that point.

The Gospel birth narratives are interesting. Mark begins with Jesus as an adult. Matthew tells us the story of the birth of Jesus from the perspective of Joseph. Luke gives us the perspective of Mary. And the Gospel of John gives us the perspective from Heaven. We are looking at Joseph's story, so let's turn back to Matthew 1,

<sup>18</sup> This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Joseph, to whom she was engaged, was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly.

<sup>20</sup> As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. "Joseph, son of David," the angel said, "do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

<sup>22</sup> All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord's message through his prophet:

<sup>23</sup> “Look! The virgin will conceive a child!  
 She will give birth to a son,  
 and they will call him Immanuel,  
 which means ‘God is with us.’ ”

<sup>24</sup> When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife. <sup>25</sup> But he did not have sexual relations with her until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus.

## **The Betrothal**

We are told that Mary was engaged to be married to Joseph. This was not some small deal. It is possible that Mary and Joseph were brought together by their parents. Some dowry was likely paid to Mary’s parents to secure the engagement.

Unlike today, Joseph and Mary likely did not spend much time together. Joseph would have gone to work preparing a home for himself and Mary. It was important to bring his bride back to a proper home. I suspect this work was not a burden to Joseph at all. It appears from the words that come later that Joseph loved Mary.

Do you remember the story of Jacob and Rachel? Jacob made a deal with Laban to work for seven years to win Rachel as his wife. Genesis tells us that those seven years were like a day. Was the same true for Joseph?

## **The News**

There is great understatement in the words,  
 But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Joseph, to whom she was engaged, was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly.

This would be like saying that before the wedding, the bride was found to be filled with cancer. That statement would be far more powerful and significant than the one sentence can convey.

We are not told when Joseph found out that Mary was pregnant. He knew he was not the father because he had been faithful to the pledge of purity before God. Most certainly, Mary (or perhaps her father) told Joseph about Mary being with the child before she left to see Aunt Elizabeth. Afterward, Mary would already be six months pregnant.

Perhaps Joseph was told that the child was the product, not of unfaithfulness, but was from the Holy Spirit. I don’t know any man who would conclude, “Oh, well then, OK.” It doesn’t matter how faithful a man you are. That story would have been a little difficult to swallow. Imagine being Joseph. We can see how he would have felt betrayed by the one he had given his heart to.

The sense of rejection would have hurt him. He likely felt dismayed that he had put work into a home for the two of them. He might have been sad and certainly embarrassed. He may have been angry that Mary came up with such a lame story about her pregnancy. He likely felt rejected. In addition, he would have been confused, frustrated, and, yes, defeated.

Can you imagine all the thoughts that went through the head of Joseph? Did he cry out to God? Did He ask why this was happening to him?

Maybe you have been in this situation when your plans didn't materialize. Perhaps you had an engagement that ended or a marriage that resulted in divorce. Maybe you looked forward to having children and then learned you could not have your own children. Or maybe you had a child, but it had special needs or died in infancy. Maybe you had big retirement plans, but health issues saw all those plans go up in smoke.

I saw this with my parents. My dad was a saver and loved to travel. I am sure he and my mom talked about the places they would like to visit once Dad retired. However, they spent retirement with mom, watching dad disappear a little bit at a time due to early onset Alzheimer's. My father was diagnosed at 59 and died when he was 72. My parents' savings were lost in caring for my dad. It was a wicked curveball. What was the purpose of it all? I don't know.

Joseph's situation was unique but many of us have faced curve balls in life. It is unpleasant. Joseph's head was spinning with the news. I am sure he wondered, "What would people think?" an engagement was binding. To be found pregnant before the marriage had been consummated was considered adultery. The penalty for adultery could be death by stoning. If he had let his anger get the best of him, Joseph could have gotten his revenge by exposing Mary as one who was unfaithful. But that was not the kind of guy Joseph was.

Jewish law made a provision for a couple to break the engagement quietly. Joseph must have cared about Mary because this is the path he chose. He chose to protect Mary . . . even if she didn't want him. His plan was simple: he would end the engagement, and Mary could be with the child's father if she so chose.

## **Another Curve**

The next curve ball may have been more perplexing than the first. Joseph had a dream,

<sup>20</sup>As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. "Joseph, son of David," the angel said, "do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup>And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

This must have been some dream! When Joseph awoke from the dream, I suspect he lay in his bed for a long time pondering what was said to him. The dream verified what he had been told about the pregnancy . . . Mary had not been unfaithful. God had chosen her and him (by

extension) for a sacred task. This curveball may have been even more devastating than the first one. I suspect numerous people canceled their engagements for various reasons. No one continued their engagement because the Holy Spirit had impregnated the bride!

Can you imagine the things that went through Joseph's mind?

- Everyone is going to think we were immoral in our relationship and could not wait until we were married. People can do the math! What shame will this bring to our families?
- Everyone will consider this child to be illegitimate because it was conceived out of wedlock. That is no way for the Savior to come into the world.
- How in the world am I supposed to raise the Messiah? I am just a common, ordinary man. I can't provide for this child how He deserves to be cared for.

It was an incredible calling, but Joseph was just an ordinary man asking, "Why me, Lord."

Don't miss the fact that there is a crisis of faith here. This is usually the case when God calls us to do something extraordinary. We may understand what He wants, but it seems incredible that He wants this from the US! We come up with various reasons why it must be a mistake. We are too poor, too corrupt, we lack talent, we don't know enough, and there are so many better choices out there.

Joseph undoubtedly knew that there would be a price to be paid. Joseph's reputation as a "righteous man" might never recover from the scandal that people would assume. The pressure to be a good dad to the Son of God would be debilitating.

Yet, Joseph did what he was told to do. He took Mary as his wife and respected her purity until the baby was born. He traveled with Mary to Bethlehem (which I am sure was a journey they both welcomed to get away from town gossip even though it was arduous) and he ended up being the midwife in a stable surrounded by animals. And let's face it, the surroundings would have led to yet another crisis of faith. "Lord, if this is your child, should he not be born in more regal surroundings? At least, more sanitary surroundings?"

This wasn't something you could talk about with your friends. Who would believe what you were saying? They would laugh at the absurdity of the Messiah coming to earth in this way.

Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14,

<sup>23</sup> "Look! The virgin will conceive a child!  
She will give birth to a son,  
and they will call him Immanuel,  
which means 'God is with us.' "

As I read the text it sounds like this is commentary by Matthew and not words spoken to Joseph. I suspect however that these words were pondered by the young couple over and over.

As Jesus grew, Joseph did his best to raise his son to be a godly man. How much did Joseph know about what Jesus had come to do? We don't know.

## Applications

In these looks at the people's struggles in the Christmas story, there are some important things for us to learn.

**First, God sometimes calls ordinary people to do extraordinary things.** We don't always know that God calls us to do something extraordinary. Sometimes He calls us to do something difficult.

- To do something you have never done before. It could be to sing a song, start a ministry, reach out to a hostile unbeliever, discuss with a skeptic, go to a foreign land (that may be in your own country), and share the gospel.
- Giving in an uncomfortable way may make you feel a little insecure.
- To forgive someone who doesn't deserve it and someone you don't want to forgive.
- To extend mercy to someone whom we do not find particularly drawn to.
- To risk living according to God's Word when the command seems ridiculous.

Some people have visions of grandeur. They imagine God "needing them" to save the world. Such people have an inflated view of self. God doesn't NEED anyone. What we are talking about here are things that might be downright terrifying.

**Second**, when God calls us, we often face a faith crisis. We wonder if God really is calling us. We will wonder if He will help us. We will wonder if we can trust Him. **God calls us to step out in faith, believing that God knows what He is doing . . . even in calling us.** The Lord does not call highly competent people. Generally, He does just the opposite, He calls those humble and meek. In doing so, He opens the door for Him to be glorified rather than the giftedness of the one called. The Lord specializes in calling the unexpected. If you feel a call on your life to do something, but you are dismissing it because you are not qualified . . . you are likely pushing aside an opportunity for God to use you in ways that will stagger your mind.

**Third, Notice how Joseph Responded.** Joseph pondered . . . he didn't react, he thought about things. Second, he listened. Finally, he obeyed. When life throws a curve we can react (impulsively) or we can get quiet and listen for the whispers of God's Spirit who often speaks through His Word and at other times through a still small voice in our soul.

I would not be surprised if you feel a lot like Joseph. Your life has experienced curveballs, and you are not even close to hitting them . . . much less hitting them out of the park. You may feel discouraged, defeated, angry, or unsettled because things have not gone as expected. You perhaps had your life pretty well mapped out in your mind, and now it all seems to be turned upside down.

You may feel your circumstance is unfair. You may feel God is picking on you or at least has failed to provide the blessing you believe He said would be yours. You could be here today disillusioned by life, by the holidays, and maybe even by this sermon.

The lesson we gain from today is this: God does not waste things. He does not waste circumstances, and He will not waste you! God may be positioning you to do something more significant than you can grasp or imagine. He may be using the pain to redeem you for an avenue of service beyond your wildest imagination. And you may not see what He is doing in this life.

The key is to keep listening. Dare to take that step of faith. Dare to believe that God will provide, guide, and use you even amid craziness.

The idea that God doesn't like you . . . just isn't true. He sees you as capable of far more than you can dream. He wants you to be a Kingdom Builder. He wants you to dare to trust Him and to do what can only be done in His strength.

One more thing: **be ready to take a solid swing at life's fastballs when they are thrown.** In other words, when life is good, don't waste time worrying about when life may be hard. Don't stand around "waiting for the other shoe to drop." Sometimes, Christians feel guilty for enjoying life. The only time we are given is right now! Embrace the good things, celebrate the people who enrich your life, be generous, and enjoy your time together. The reality that any one of us could be taken back to the Lord instantly should lead us to savor every opportunity we have.

The Bible talks a great deal about perseverance, but it also talks about joy and blessing. The two are balanced. If we let them get too far "out of balance," we will either be reckless because we believe life will always be easy, or we conclude life is always hard and become sluggish and unmotivated. We will be oblivious to the blessings that come our way or see them in such a negative light that they become burdens rather than a blessing. Stop that!

We must embrace the good news that is given to us, it is one of the richest blessings we can enjoy. We sometimes feel that God owes a blessing to us because we are trying to live a good life. God owes us nothing, so we should be grateful for every blessing . . . and there are many more than we realize.

Joseph is the first of our common (and troubled) characters of Christmas. We will see this scenario played out again week after week. We will see that these were normal people just like us. They were thrown a curve and they took a big giant swing . . . and hit it out of the park. Our hope is we will all be encouraged to do the very same thing.