

THE OBEDIENCE OF JOSEPH

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Matthew 1:18-2:23

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INTRO.

-- Of the major characters in the biblical accounts of the Christmas story Joseph is the only one who doesn't say a word. Angels announce Jesus' birth. The Wise Men tell about the appearance of the star. Even the shepherds have dialogue. Mary, of course, has the most to say, including an entire song that she composes and sings spontaneously. But for Joseph there's not even one word recorded. In that respect, you could say that Mary and Joseph had a fairly typical relationship.

-- Although he doesn't say anything, Joseph, nonetheless, is on center stage throughout Matthew's presentation of the Christmas story. Joseph is a powerful example to us, not because of what he says but because of what he does. Turn in your Bibles to Matthew 1.

Cf., Matthew 1

As we examine the Christmas story in Matthew's Gospel, we find 3 critical occasions where Joseph must decide to obey God.

I. First Decision: At the Time of Mary's Pregnancy (1:18-25)

A. Joseph & Mary's "Betrothal"

-- Matthew's account of the Christmas story begins during the time when Joseph and Mary are "betrothed" to one another. As we saw last week, betrothal was something like a cross between engagement and marriage. Betrothed couples were legally committed to one another. Betrothal was a binding relationship that could be broken only by death or adultery. The betrothal period lasted one year, and during that time the couple, though legally committed to one another, continued to live separately and to abstain from any form of sexual contact. One of the purposes of betrothal was to demonstrate the bride's purity - to demonstrate the she wasn't pregnant at the time the couple got betrothed. A pregnancy was about the worst thing that could happen during a betrothal. In the eyes of many it would be better for the woman to die than to get pregnant.

-- But that unthinkable development was precisely what took place during Joseph's and Mary's betrothal. When Mary confessed to Joseph that she was pregnant, both of them knew that Joseph was not the father. Of course, Mary told Joseph about the angel that had appeared to her telling her that God had chosen her to give birth to the Messiah and that the baby inside her would be supernaturally conceived by the Holy Spirit. But to Joseph the story was absurd, something totally unbelievable.

B. Joseph's Character (v. 19)

-- In verse 19 Matthew gives us information about Joseph that is essential if we are to understand the kind of a man he is and why he reacts the way he does to this crisis.

v. 19

-- What we find here are two important insights into Joseph's character.

1. His Righteousness

a. A "tsaddiyq"

-- Joseph was a "just man," what the Hebrews called a tsaddiyq. As pastor and author John Ortberg notes that to be a tsaddiyq meant that you were known "for uncompromising obedience to the Torah, the Law of Moses." The tsaddiyq lived by the 10 Commandments plus hundreds of other moral, social, dietary and religious rules and regulations. As a tsaddiyq Joseph's highest value would have been obedience to God's Word and the honor of being such a person.

-- But being a tsaddiyq created an enormous conflict for Joseph when he found that the woman he loved and to whom he was betrothed was pregnant. Mary's pregnancy was equivalent to

adultery, something that a man like Joseph would have considered to be one of the worst offenses against God. As a *tsaddiyq* Joseph knew that God's Word and tradition required the sin to be exposed and punished, but Joseph couldn't bring himself to do that to Mary - and that reveals the second important aspect about Joseph's character - his kindness.

b. His Kindness

-- As painful as Mary's pregnancy must have been for Joseph, he still cared for Mary - and he knew that a public accusation and divorce would subject Mary and her family to the ugliest and most humiliating forms of shame and abuse. Torn between his sense of righteousness, his deep hurt, and his love for Mary, Joseph struggled mightily about what to do.

(cf., scene from *The Nativity*)

Joseph resolved the tension between his righteousness and his kindness by deciding to accuse and divorce Mary quietly, before just two witnesses.

-- Then, after allowing Joseph to struggle with this agonizing decision, God sent an angel to deliver a message to Joseph in a dream.

Cf., vv. 20-21

-- Notice that the angel said to Joseph, "do not fear to take Mary as your wife."

(v. 20b)

So why would Joseph be afraid to go through with the marriage? Joseph's fear of marrying Mary was probably two-fold. First, he was afraid of offending God by marrying an unfaithful woman, but that fear was eliminated when the angel confirmed Mary's claim that the baby had been conceived by the Holy Spirit. However, the second fear still remained - the fear of losing his reputation as a *tsaddiyq*, a righteous man. The shame and disgrace that would have been focused on Mary would now expand to include Joseph. Instead of being admired and respected, Joseph and Mary would be looked upon as sinners and shunned. It was this loss of being respected as a righteous man that Joseph feared and dreaded. A man like Joseph could have easily chosen death over dishonor, but Joseph didn't hesitate.

C. Joseph's Obedience (vv. 24-25)

Cf., vv. 24-25

-- This unhesitating obedience, this submitting without objection, delay or reservation is Joseph's consistent response to God's Word.

II. Second Decision: The Threat from Herod's Murderous Order (2:1-18)

A. The Census & Journey to Bethlehem

-- As we know, while Mary was pregnant with Jesus, the Roman emperor decreed that a census be taken throughout the empire, causing Mary and Joseph to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem to register in Joseph's ancestral hometown. They arrived in Bethlehem just in time for Mary to give birth to Jesus.

B. The Magi & Herod's Scheme

-- The family continued to live in Bethlehem, probably because it was a good place for them to start over, a place where they wouldn't have to live with all the rumors and disapproving stares that they would have encountered daily in Nazareth. So Joseph set up his carpenter's trade, and the family had been living there for a year or two when the Magi, the Wise Men from the East (modern-day Iraq) arrived in Judea.

So, contrary to our popular images of the Nativity, the Wise Men didn't show up at the stable on the night that Jesus was born. They actually arrived a year or two later. Having seen a new star that they associated with the Jewish prophecies and expectations of a Messiah, the Magi came in search of the newborn King of the Jews to honor him and to present gifts to him. When the Wise Men came to Jerusalem asking about a new king, they were brought to Herod, the King of Judea. Herod was insanely suspicious of any possible threat to his power, and the Magi's inquiry about a newborn king wasn't welcome news. Being a clever man who survived as much by his wits as by his power, Herod hid his true feelings from the Wise Men. Pretending to be helpful, Herod called for the Bible scholars in order to determine where the Messiah was supposed to be born. When he found out that the prophesied birthplace was Bethlehem, Herod sent the Magi there to find the child and then to come back to let Herod know where the child was, ostensibly so that Herod could also go to pay homage to him.

-- Led by a star, the Magi found the house (not a stable) where Joseph, Mary and Jesus, now a young child, were living. Upon seeing Jesus, the Magi bowed before Him and presented to Him gifts fit for a king. The God warned the Magi in a dream not to return to Herod; so they left quietly without returning through Jerusalem.

C. Herod's Orders & God's Warning

-- When Herod realized that the Magi had got away, he was furious and gave orders to his soldiers to go to Bethlehem and kill all the male children in the village who were 2 years old and under.
-- That night, God once again sent an angel to Joseph to warn him in a dream about Herod's plan.

v. 13

D. Joseph's Crisis & Obedience

-- It's another crisis time for Joseph. He's not a seasoned traveler - Bethlehem and Jerusalem are probably the farthest that he has ever been from home. And now God is telling him to become a refugee, to flee to a foreign country and to be there for an indefinite period of time. Joseph doesn't know when - if ever - he and his family will return to their homeland. Many of you understand this well because you came to America as refugees.

-- What God is telling Joseph to do is far from easy. It's a journey full of difficulties and uncertainties, but Joseph once again responds with prompt obedience.

Cf., vv. 14-15a

III. Third Decision: The Return to Israel (2:19-23)

A The Angel's Instruction

-- Joseph, Mary and Jesus probably lived in Egypt for 2 or 3 years until Herod had died. Then again God sent an angel to Joseph in a dream to instruct him to take Mary and Jesus back to Israel.

B The Return to Bethlehem

-- Joseph was probably eager and excited about returning to their homeland, and the family intended to settle once again in Bethlehem. But when they arrived in Israel, they learned that Herod's son Archelaus had succeeded Herod as King of Judea, the southern part of Israel. Archelaus had a reputation for being as cruel and unpredictable as his father, Herod. So Joseph was afraid to go back to Bethlehem, which was just 5 miles from Archelaus' palace in Jerusalem.

Once more God sent a warning to Joseph in a dream, instructing him to return to Nazareth - back to the place where it had all begun, back to the place that Joseph and Mary had tried to leave behind them, back to live with the rumors, the disapproval, and the rejection. Joseph must have dreaded the thought of returning to Nazareth, but once again he obeys without objection or hesitation.

Cf., vv. 22-23a

CONCLUSION

As I read and reflected on these incidents in the life of Joseph, I remembered the old Experiencing God course written by Henry Blackaby. Those of you who have taken the course might remember that Blackaby identifies several biblical principles for knowing and doing the will of God. Henry says that God is always at work in the world around us and that He invites us to join Him in that work, and that God's invitation to join Him in His work always produces a crisis - a crisis that can only be resolved successfully if we trust and obey.

That's exactly what we see in Joseph's life. God's invitation and instruction always leads to a crisis in Joseph's life. And each time Joseph responded with faith and obedience. May God help us to do the same.