

# JOSEPH: OBEY GOD, EVEN WHEN ITS NOT EASY

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Matthew 1-2:

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INTRO.

-- Of the major characters in the Christmas story Joseph is the only one who doesn't have a word of recorded dialogue in the Bible. The angels announce Jesus' birth. The Magi tell about the appearance of the star and inquire about where the newborn king can be found. The shepherds have recorded dialogue. And Mary has a lot of recorded dialogue, including the words to an entire song that she sings. But for Joseph, there's not even one word recorded. So Mary has a lot to say, and Joseph has nothing. I guess some things never change!

-- Although he doesn't say anything, Joseph is still a central character in the Christmas cast. Indeed, it's Joseph not Mary who is at center stage throughout the first two chapters of Matthew's Gospel. While Luke tells the Christmas story from Mary's perspective, Matthew tells it from Joseph's, which is found in Matthew 1-2.

Matthew 1 (p. 681)

And despite Joseph's silence he still has something important to teach us about obeying God.

In most regards, Joseph is a common and ordinary man. He's a carpenter living in northern Israel, in the Galilean village of Nazareth, but for Matthew the most important aspect of Joseph's circumstances is the contained in 1:18.

Matt. 1:18

## I. JOSEPH'S CIRCUMSTANCES (V. 18)

-- Joseph is "pledged to be married," a status also known as "betrothed." Betrothal in that culture was a cross between engagement and marriage and actually resembled marriage more than engagement. Betrothal began with a ceremony before family and friends in which Joseph and Mary would have made vows committing themselves to one another as husband and wife; however, they would have lived apart and not had sexual relations for one year. Betrothal meant that they were legally bound to one another, and that bond could be broken only by death or divorce. Unfaithfulness during the betrothal period was considered adultery, and the penalty was the same - death by stoning, although that was rarely carried out in Roman-occupied Israel. I suppose that the primary reason for the one year of living apart and abstaining from sex was to demonstrate that the woman was not pregnant before the marriage was consummated and to ensure that any offspring were indeed those of the husband.

-- Knowing Mary's character and deep spirituality, Joseph probably never gave a thought to the possibility of Mary's ever becoming pregnant during the betrothal period. And yet that unthinkable possibility was exactly what took place. Mary did, in fact, become pregnant, and both of them knew that Joseph wasn't the father. Mary, obviously, would have tried to explain to Joseph that an angel had appeared to her to tell her that God had chosen her to give birth to the Messiah and that the baby inside her had not been conceived by another man but had been conceived supernaturally by the Holy Spirit. To Joseph, however, this "wild" explanation would have been completely unbelievable. Many miracles had occurred in Israel's history, but a virgin conceiving had never been one of them.

## II. JOSEPH'S CHARACTER (V. 19)

-- In verse 19 Matthew gives us important insight into Joseph's character.

### A. HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS

-- The first thing we see about Joseph's character is that he was "a righteous man," what the Hebrews called a tsaddiyq. As a tsaddiyq Joseph held God's Word in the highest regard and was dedicated to living in

obedience to the Torah, the Law of Moses. Joseph sought to obey not only the 10 Commandments but hundreds of other moral, social, dietary and religious rules and regulations. Few things could have been worse for such a man than to discover that the one to whom he was betrothed was pregnant. For Joseph, marriage was a holy commitment, and Mary's pregnancy was not only a betrayal against him personally but also a serious sin and offense against God. Joseph could not overlook it or take it lightly.

#### B. HIS KINDNESS

-- But there's a second aspect of Joseph's character that was just as important as his righteousness: his kindness. Many, perhaps most, tsaddiyqs would have reacted to Mary's pregnancy with wounded pride and would have brought her before the village to accuse her publicly of being an adulteress. But Joseph knew that such an accusation would bring upon Mary a lifetime of shame and rejection. Joseph's kindness wouldn't let him do that to her. The seeming conflict between Joseph's righteousness and kindness must have caused an agonizing struggle for him.

Scene from The Nativity

-- Joseph resolved the tension between his righteousness and his kindness by deciding to divorce Mary quietly, accusing her not before the entire village but before just two witnesses.

-- It's important for us to see that when God chose an earthly guardian for His Son God chose Joseph - a man who was both righteous and kind, a man who valued God's Law and cared about people. To be righteous but not kind is to be a self-righteous legalist like the Pharisees. To be kind but not righteous is to be destructively indulgent. Righteousness and kindness are character companions that keep us spiritually balanced.

### III. JOSEPH'S OBEDIENCE (V. 38)

-- Joseph's righteousness and kindness are the foundation for the most prominent feature about Joseph in the Christmas story - his obedience. Joseph displays repeated obedience in this account, and it begins with his obedience to take Mary as his wife.

#### A. TAKE MARY (1:20-25)

-- It's interesting that God let Joseph struggle with the decision about how to respond to Mary's pregnancy and that it was only after Joseph made a decision that God sent an angel to speak to Joseph in a dream.

vv. 20-21

The angel said to Joseph, "Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife." Let me ask you a question: why would Joseph be "afraid" to take Mary as his wife? He knew now that Mary had conceived through the Holy Spirit. What Joseph would have still feared in taking Mary as his wife was the loss of his reputation as a righteous man. The shame and disgrace that would have focused on Mary would have now been expanded to include him as well. Instead of being admired and respected, he and Mary would both be looked upon as sinners. Joseph would lose what he valued most - the esteem as a righteous man. But Joseph did what we will see him do again and again - he obeyed God without argument or excuse-making or hesitation.

vv. 24-25

#### B. FLEE TO EGYPT (2:1-18)

-- As you know, while Mary was in the final stage of her pregnancy, she and Joseph had to travel to Bethlehem to register for a census, and Jesus was born there. For whatever reason they decided to stay in Bethlehem, and about a year or two later the Magi (the Wise Men) arrived in Jerusalem searching for the new heir to the throne whose birth had been heralded by a new star in the eastern sky. King Herod was insanely suspicious of any possible threat to his power, and the talk of a newborn king being sought by dignitaries from so far away sent Herod's paranoia into overdrive. Finding out that an OT prophecy named Bethlehem as the site where the Messiah would be born, Herod sent the Magi there to find the child and then to report back to him the child's location, ostensibly so that Herod could also go to pay homage to him. But after the Magi found Jesus and worshipped Him, God warned them in a dream not to return to Herod. When Herod realized that the Magi had left secretly, he was furious and gave orders for his soldiers to go to Bethlehem and kill all the male children who were two years of age and under.

That night God sent an angel to Joseph in a dream to warn him about Herod's plan.

2:13

-- It was another crisis time for Joseph. He wasn't a seasoned traveler. Bethlehem was probably the farthest he had ever traveled, and it was his ancestral home, which meant that he probably had relatives

there. Now, God was telling Joseph to become a refugee, to flee to a foreign country for an indefinite period of time. Joseph didn't know when they would return to their homeland - if ever. Many of you have come to America as refugees, and you know well the kind of crisis that Joseph was facing.

But once again Joseph responded with unhesitating obedience.

2:14-15a

### C. RETURN TO ISRAEL (2:19-23)

-- Joseph and Mary and Jesus probably lived in Egypt for about 2 or 3 years until Herod's death. Then, once again, God sent an angel to Joseph in a dream to tell him to take his family back to Israel.

Joseph was probably excited about returning to their homeland. They intended to live 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 as being as cruel and dangerous and unpredictable as his father Herod. So Joseph was afraid to go to Bethlehem. Once again, God sent instructions to Joseph in a dream, telling him to return to Nazareth, back to live with all the rumors, the disapproval and rejection.

And again Joseph obeyed.

vv. 22-23a

### CONCLUSION

As I read about Joseph this week, I thought of the discipleship course called Experiencing God by Henry Blackaby. The course is built around principles for knowing and doing the will of God that Blackaby identifies from the Bible. 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 produces a crisis of belief that requires faith and action.

That's exactly what we see in Joseph. God's invitation for Joseph to join in God's plan led to repeated crises in Joseph's life, and each time Joseph responded with faith and obedient action. May God help us to follow his example and do the same.