

Week 1 - Joseph: From Faith to Fatherhood - Matthew 1:18-25

Scripture Reading: Matthew 1:18-25

Introduction

This morning, we are starting a four-week series where we will look at some of the lesser-mentioned characters of the Christmas narrative.

Much is said, and rightly so, about Mary and the baby Jesus, but there were many others, those I call the supporting cast, who had a part to play in Christmas.

And we can learn a great deal from them - when we take the time to notice them.

I'm going to start with a man who I feel gets shortchanged in the biblical account of Jesus' birth and life, Joseph.

Joseph was the husband of Mary, and he served as Jesus' earthly foster father, but we really don't know much more about him because God didn't choose to preserve many of the details of his life.

We know that his father's name was Jacob and that he came from the line of David, the greatest king in Israel's history because Matthew records his lineage in the verses that open his gospel account.

That means that Joseph was in the line of royalty and also that he had to later travel, along with Mary, to Bethlehem, the city of David for the census because he was of the house and family of David [**Luke 2:4**].

We know that he and Mary lived in Nazareth and that he was a tradesman or craftsman and most likely a carpenter.

Matthew tells us that in **Matthew 13:55** and Mark relates how people referred to Jesus as "the carpenter" in **Mark 6:3** and, in those days, boys typically followed in their father's footsteps when it came to a career.

Matthew and Mark also say that Mary and Joseph had four sons together and an unstated number of daughters.

Beyond those few facts, we really can't say anything about Joseph with certainty.

However, we can surmise some things as we read the gospel accounts.

First, it seems that Joseph and Mary were everyday people who didn't have much in the way of material possessions.

We see that hinted at when Luke records [**Luke 2:22-24**] how they brought Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem to present him to the Lord as was the custom.

We see them make the requisite sacrifice according to the Law, and they offered "a pair of turtledove or two young pigeons," which Leviticus 12:8 says is permissible for someone who can't afford to sacrifice a lamb.

We can also determine that Joseph must have died before Jesus began his ministry.

We don't hear anything about Joseph after the incident when Jesus was twelve years old, and he was found in the temple after his family had left Jerusalem and traveled part way home, as recorded in Luke 2:41-51.

Also, he isn't mentioned as being present at Jesus' crucifixion as Mary was, and it would seem odd for Jesus to make arrangements for his mother's well-being after his death if Joseph were still living.

It seems likely that Jesus, as the oldest son, had been supporting his mother and the rest of the dependent family before he began his ministry - most likely plying his trade as a carpenter.

Beyond those facts, we don't know much.

We don't know how Joseph died or where he was buried; we don't even know how old he was when he married Mary.

But we will see some other facts about Joseph as we work through our study today.

Matthew begins by stating that his point in writing the verses before us this morning was to tell how the birth of Jesus Christ took place.

We don't want to miss the crucial fact that God the Father chose to send his Son to earth to be born as a baby, and for that to happen, that baby would need parents.

That's so fundamental that we think our way past it without giving it much consideration, but it does call into question what kind of people God would choose as those parents.

Surprisingly, God chose an obscure, lowly couple of little means from a backwater village that appears to have been held in low esteem in Jesus' day.

Even one of Jesus' twelve disciples, Nathaniel, questioned [John 1:46] whether anything good had ever come out of Nazareth.

God chose Mary and Joseph out of all the people on earth to raise and nurture his Son, and while much has been written and many sermons have been preached about Mary, Joseph is sort of the forgotten man of Christmas.

But he had a significant role to play that required a specific kind of man, and Matthew's portrait reveals a godly man of conviction and compassion who cooperated with God, likely at significant cost to himself.

The passage breaks rather neatly into three acts, which I am calling "unexpected humiliation," "heavenly explanation," and "commendable cooperation."

I. Unexpected Humiliation

To appreciate Joseph's situation rightly, we need to understand something of the Jewish marriage customs of the day.

Marriages in those days weren't typically made for love as they are today.

Marriage was mainly entered into for the mutual benefit of the families involved and typically arranged by the fathers of the bride and groom long before the wedding, often while the couple were still children and too young to marry.

There were three steps involved in the typical Jewish marriage:

1. Engagement, where the fathers got together and determined the terms of the future marriage.
2. Betrothal, which made the prior arrangement official and binding as the couple became husband and wife.
3. Marriage was the actual ceremony that took place after the betrothal period was completed.

During the betrothal, the couple returned to their respective parents' homes - the groom to prepare a bridal chamber at his father's home where he and his bride would one day live and the bride to wait for him.

The betrothal typically lasted a year or so, with the groom's father determining when it was completed.

And, while the couple was considered married, they did not live together, have sexual relations, or, in many cases, have that much contact with one another.

Still, the couple was considered man and wife during the betrothal, and a formal divorce was required for the couple to split up.

The year-long waiting period was, at least in part, a test of the commitment and faithfulness of the bride and groom.

So imagine Joseph's shock and humiliation when it was discovered that Mary was pregnant.

We aren't told how this fact became known, only that she was "found to be with child."

Matthew doesn't include the details, but we know from Luke's gospel that Mary knew the Holy Spirit fathered the child she was carrying and that she had not been unfaithful to Joseph.

No doubt that's what she told Joseph, but he could hardly be blamed for not buying it.

All he knew for sure was that his wife was pregnant, and he wasn't the father.

Imagine yourself in Joseph's sandals and think about what you would do.

In our ESV Bible, the English word “just” is used to describe Joseph.

However, the word Matthew used means to be observant of what God requires or righteous.

Joseph was an observant Jew, and he knew how seriously God regards faithfulness in marriage, and he had every right to divorce Mary.

He also knew God’s Law instructed how to handle unfaithfulness during a betrothal.

Deuteronomy 22:20-21 states unequivocally:

But if the thing is true, that evidence of virginity was not found in the young woman, then they shall bring out the young woman to the door of her father’s house, and the men of her city shall stone her to death with stones, because she has done an outrageous thing in Israel by whoring in her father’s house. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

So, in Joseph’s mind, there were two ways to handle the situation: seek a public divorce by taking the matter to a judge at the city gate or divorce her privately by presenting her with the divorce certificate in the presence of two witnesses.

At the very least, a private divorce would spare Mary the humiliation of doing it in public and perhaps even her life.

Joseph was righteous, and he knew God’s will for marriage.

He wanted a godly and pure wife to raise his children, and he knew his rights under the Law meant he could get just revenge for his humiliation.

But he was also merciful and unwilling to shame Mary more, so he decided he would handle the matter quietly.

There are two things I want to highlight about Joseph’s character and how he should be a model for us today.

First, the fact that he spared Mary additional humiliation shows he loved and cared for her.

But Joseph still resolved to honor God by observing his Law even though it had to have broken his heart to do so.

Far too often today, we see people who have firm convictions right up until a situation arises where holding to God’s standard will mean personal cost.

Milwaukee radio personality Mark Belling says that rationalization is the second strongest human drive - and he may be right.

We can find all sorts of reasons why obeying God is wrong when doing so gets in the way of what we want.

Either that or we take on the serpent's argument in the garden and ask, “Did God *really* say...?”

Joseph was a man of conviction who refused to compromise for his own comfort.

Second, Joseph had every right to take the matter of Mary’s perceived unfaithfulness public.

In fact, he had every right to demand that she be dragged out of her father’s home and stoned in his front yard.

He could have gotten his pound of flesh, thereby redeeming his and his family's reputation.

That’s what he would have been encouraged to do today.

After all, isn’t “I don’t get mad, I get even” how we’re supposed to handle grievances?

Conviction without compassion can result in brutality.

No one can doubt that Joseph was a man of conviction and willing to do what God’s Law required, but he was determined to be obedient while causing the least harm.

Spurgeon admonished, “When we have to do a severe thing, let us choose the tenderest manner.”

Sometimes, remaining true to God means hurting others, but we ought to follow Joseph’s example and seek to cause the slightest hurt possible while doing so.

Remember, the Jews weren't expecting the Messiah to arrive via virgin birth.

We see the matter from the perspective of 2,000 years of history, but Joseph was being asked to believe what had to be a wildly impossible explanation given his understanding.

So, he resolved to be true to his convictions while remaining compassionate in his actions.

That is, until an angel appeared to him in a dream to give him a heavenly explanation that changed everything.

II. Heavenly Explanation

Joseph had decided but hadn't yet taken action.

It's not surprising to read that he was "considering these things" or reflecting on his decision while in bed - I doubt he could think about much else every waking moment.

These days, when it's almost assumed that couples who are engaged to be married are having sexual relations, it's difficult for us to appreciate the seriousness of Joseph and Mary's situation fully and the turmoil Joseph felt.

Hardly anyone would so much as bat an eye at the idea of a pregnant bride today.

But Joseph was struggling.

He continued to wrestle with his decision because he remained uncomfortable, although he knew it was right.

He knew what he had to do, but he hadn't yet done it, and God sent an angel to speak to Joseph to convince him to go through with the wedding.

Perhaps the angel who was sent was Gabriel.

After all, he was the angel who appeared to Zechariah in Luke 1:19 and Mary in Luke 1:26 to announce God's plan to them.

The only difference is that those were physical visitations by Gabriel, whereas this unnamed angel appeared to Joseph in a dream.

The angel's address is a formal one that refers to Joseph's legal lineage to the throne of David.

I suspect Joseph was immediately on notice that this was a serious matter because I doubt he was used to being addressed in such a manner.

It's like having your mom use all your names when addressing you.

You know that you should pay rapt attention to what is coming.

The angel began by telling Joseph that he should not be afraid to take Mary for his wife because the baby within her was from the Holy Spirit.

Now, we can't know whether Mary had previously told Joseph about the Holy Spirit's involvement with her pregnancy, making this a confirmation of the facts, or whether Joseph was hearing it for the first time.

In either event, the angel's words convinced Joseph, and he canceled his plan to divorce Mary.

But the angel wasn't finished yet as we next inform Joseph that Mary was going to have a son and that he should name him Jesus.

Jesus, which means "the salvation of Jehovah," was a common name at the time but in this case it had a special meaning because this Jesus would actually save his people from their sins just as Isaiah prophesied in **Isaiah 7:14**.

As a brief aside, Immanuel was never meant to be Jesus' given name; it was a description of who he is and what he does as many of the Old Testament names he was to be "called" were.

Names like "Wonderful Counselor," "Mighty God," "Everlasting Father," and "Prince of Peace" are descriptors and so is "Immanuel."

But his given name was to be “Jesus” and, as Peter said in **Acts 4:12**:

“There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

The angel’s message, at least as we have it recorded for us, is actually rather brief and it doesn’t contain a whole lot of explanation.

I don’t know about you but I would have all kinds of questions after receiving a message like that.

For starters, I would have wanted a little expansion on the how of the whole Holy Spirit pregnancy thing.

But we aren’t given any explanation as to how it happened and, apparently, neither were Joseph or even Mary as the only thing recorded in the Bible is in **Luke 1:35**.

The key thing that it seems Joseph picked up on, though, was that Mary wasn’t with child because she had been unfaithful but because of her faithfulness to God.

The angel came to Joseph in a dream, reminded him of who he was and what Scripture says and that was enough for Joseph as we see in verses 24-25.

III. Commendable Cooperation

We might be tempted to shrug off Joseph’s obedience as no big deal but that would be to look at the whole affair from a 21st century perspective.

Not much is made today of a pregnant bride - it may cause a minor stir when the baby comes “prematurely” but it’s all forgotten pretty quickly.

But it seems Joseph was a man of simple faithfulness who, when shown the next right thing to do, did it.

So much of following God is simply asking, “What is the next step I should take?”

The Bible consistently reminds us of who we are as Christ-followers and shows us what God desires and it’s our duty to obey without hesitation as Joseph did.

It all sounds so simple, doesn’t it?

But we need to consider what Joseph’s obedience meant because this was no easy assignment he was signing up for.

Remember that no one in their immediate circle of acquaintance had the benefit of an angelic visit like he and Mary did.

Their family, friends, and associates would either take them at their word or they would have to reject them.

Pastor Tim Keller put it this way in his book Hidden Christmas:

Everybody in that shame-and-honor society will know that this child was not born nine or ten months after they got married; they will know she was already pregnant. That would mean either Joseph and Mary had sex before marriage or she was unfaithful to him, and as a result, they are going to be shamed, socially excluded, and rejected. They are going to be second-class citizens forever.

The harsh reality is that very few, if anyone at all, would accept their testimony of angelic visits and Holy Spirit involvement - it’s just too fantastic to believe.

I can only imagine the eye-rolling and head shaking that would accompany such an explanation.

So, Joseph’s standing by Mary and accepting the task of raising God’s Son reveals that he respected and valued God more than he feared the opinions of others.

Still, in saying yes to God, Joseph was turning his back on everything else.

His reputation in the community would be ruined as he would bear the shame of a sin he didn’t commit - but he obeyed in spite of all that.

And we see that he didn't hesitate in his obedience as he broke with tradition and immediately took Mary to be his wife. That means he ended the betrothal period himself and took her to live with him.

Maybe he figured since people were going to talk anyway they might as well give them something to talk about.

But then he went beyond what we see God command through his angel as he refrained from intimacy with Mary until after the baby was born.

And when, in due course, the son was born, Joseph did as he was told and named him Jesus.

Later on, in Matthew 2, we read how, once he heard about his birth, Herod sought to kill Jesus.

Once more, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him to move the family to Egypt and stay there until God called them back.

In our highly mobile and somewhat transient society, we wouldn't think much of a move of 140 or so miles.

But we need to remember that they had to make the move at a walking pace with a two-year old and maybe one of their other children.

Also, while they likely lived with other Jewish exiles while in Egypt, God was sending them to a foreign country which had to be quite disruptive and costly for the working-class family.

But we see no sign that Joseph hesitated at all as he once again obeyed God and took his brood to Egypt and remained there until Herod had died.

Conclusion

God chose a man of conviction, compassion, and obedience to be the foster father who raised his Son.

In Luke 2, we read how Joseph and Mary made sure to present Jesus in the temple and make the proper sacrifice as the Law required.

We also read about their commitment to godly worship as Luke records how they made it their habit to travel to Jerusalem each year to observe the Passover Feast [**Luke 2:41**].

It was during this annual trip when Jesus was 12 that we read about Joseph for the final time.

But in **Luke 2:52** we read how *Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man*.

We don't know much about Jesus' childhood and what it was like to raise the Son of God.

The Hebrew culture of Jesus' day didn't place much emphasis on childhood preferring to focus on who people were in adulthood.

And we know very well what manner of man Jesus grew to be.

I think Joseph likely deserves much of the credit for that.

Joseph knew who he was and what Scripture said and his desire was to please God as demonstrated through his ready obedience.

As Christ-followers we also know who we are - our study of 1 John which we completed last week repeatedly reminded us of that.

We also have the completed Word of God to guide us leaving the only question of whether we will be like Joseph in our obedience.

Joseph was willing to endure the shame of marrying a woman who was with a child not his own and then raise that child as his own.

But his shame was only a foreshadow of the shame that the baby would one day bear for him and Mary and everyone else on the cross as he died for sins he didn't commit.

In just a few minutes we are going to observe the ordinance of the Lord's Table as we commemorate life and sacrifice of Jesus.

At this Christmast season all the world looks to the account of Bethlehem and the baby lying in a manger - everyone loves a baby.

But this baby was born to save his people from their sins.

Everyone who is born dies one day but Jesus was born for the express purpose of giving his life for others.

That truly is the message of Christmas.

Let's pray

Matthew 1:18-25 (page 807)

Now the birth of Jesus Christ^e took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed^f to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call his name Immanuel”

(which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.