

JOSEPH: THE FORGOTTEN HERO

Obedience is Being Willing to Hear from God and Do What He Says *Through Angel Eyes (Final)*

Text: Matthew 1:18-25; 2:13-14, 19-21

When it comes to the Christmas story, isn't Joseph somewhat of a forgotten character? We actually don't know a whole lot about Joseph, do we? Even in the lineage of Jesus listed in Matthew's account, it is clear that Mary is the ultimate focus of attention, "Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called the Christ." (Matthew 1:16). Joseph is important because he is the husband of Mary. We do know that Joseph and Mary ended up in Bethlehem as the birthplace of Jesus, because Joseph was a descendant of royalty, King David. They had to go to their ancestral home to be registered in the census. The last reference to Joseph, though not by name, occurred when Jesus was 12 years of age. His family had traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover Feast, as was their custom. After the feast Joseph and Mary were on their way home to Nazareth when they realized that Jesus was not with their entourage. They had assumed that Jesus was with other family members. When they returned to Jerusalem they find Jesus holding forth in the temple, dazzling the religious leaders with his wisdom. The precocious Jesus rebukes his own parents with, "Don't you know that I had to be in my Father's house?" This is last reference to Joseph. In Jesus' adult years, Joseph is simply absent. The silence of the gospel writers tells us that Joseph had obviously died when Jesus was somewhere between ages 12 and 30. We know that Jesus was a carpenter, and therefore we assume that Joseph was one too.

Yet we do have one lasting impression, an enduring legacy that Joseph leaves behind from his portrayal in the first two chapters of Matthew's gospel. Joseph is one who heard the commands of God through the message of an angel and then did what He was told. In other words, Joseph was the embodiment of obedience.

Read Matthew 1:18-25; 2:13-14, 19-21

Obedience always comes in the context of a challenge. There would be no virtue in obedience if there were not difficult choices to be made. So what is the predicament that Joseph finds himself in that could have led to a very different decision if Joseph had not been such a man of integrity?

Let the Scripture itself state Joseph's conundrum. "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 by 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" (Matthew 1:18-19). First, let's sort out the customs related to the steps of getting married. There is a combination of words here that

should have created some cultural dissonance for us. We are told that Joseph and Mary are betrothed or pledged to be married, which to us sounds like engagement but not actual marriage. But the text also says that Joseph is her husband and in order to break the pledge he would need to divorce her. What is going on here?

In Joseph's day there were three steps involving marriage, not just two:

Step 1. Engagement: Couples in Jesus' day did not go through a process of dating in order to fall in love and then decide to be married. No, this decision was generally made for them, arranged by their parents or in consultation with a match-maker. Often the children never saw or knew each other during this engagement period. Marriage in the Middle East was considered too important to be left to the dictates of passion (meaning hormones) or the fluctuating emotions of the human heart.

Step 2. Betrothal or Pledge: The engagement would then be ratified in a one-year waiting period leading up to the formal ceremony during which the couple would be known as belonging to each other. They were called husband and wife during this one year period, but they had none of privileges of the marriage bed. The woman was known as a betrothed virgin, and if her husband died during this year of betrothal, she would be called "a virgin who is a widow." The only way to break this pledge was through divorce. This is the period during which we find Mary and Joseph.

Step 3. The Marriage Celebration. At the end of the year, a marriage celebration would be held lasting a full week accompanied by feasting and rejoicing. The rabbis considered this an exception to the rigors of fasting, for this occasion was the highlight of joy in a young couple's life. We don't know that Mary and Joseph ever got to celebrate marriage in this traditional way. As we have seen in our Scripture lesson, they were constantly on the move.

Before Mary and Joseph got to the marriage stage some unusual news intruded. Joseph receives some information, presumably from Mary, that his betrothed is pregnant during this year when sexual relations were forbidden. So here is the challenging context for Joseph. What should he do? What are the options before him?

1. Save his own skin. He could have done what any red-blooded, healthy sinful man would have done, justify himself while clearly pointing the finger of blame in Mary's direction. What conclusion would any reasonable person have drawn? If Mary was pregnant, and Joseph knew that he wasn't involved, then she must have been unfaithful. Mary must have stepped out on him, and everyone else must know it. Wouldn't Joseph's immediate thought have been that he must preserve his reputation, by making sure everyone in the village knew that Mary was to blame? Holding Mary up to public shame would shift the guilt from him to her. He is the poor, innocent victim, while she is the culprit.

This is the option that the vast majority of people would choose. One of the manifestations of the sinful heart is to paint ourselves in the best possible light and others in the worst. We minimize and excuse our faults while magnifying others. We get righteously indignant over the failures of others, especially when they impact us, while finding ways to excuse ourselves when we fail. It is amazing how much easier we are on ourselves than we are on others. We have our reasons or excuses, as the case may be.

Let's see how this works itself out in a marriage relationship. If I were to interview married couples here and ask each individually, "Which of you carries the greater load of household responsibilities?" National studies show that each partner thinks they do 75% of what it takes to keep a household running. Some of our arguments at home are driven by the perceptions of who is working harder. When we start keeping score we always think what we are doing is of greater consequence than our partner.

On a much more significant moral scale, Robert Lifton in his book *The Nazis Doctors*, attempted to answer the question, "How do you justify behavior where ordinary people commit demonic acts?" He concluded that the way the Nazis doctors, who presided over the extermination of millions, dealt with their guilt was to say to themselves that they were decent people trying to make the best of horrendous situation. They feigned innocence while blaming the system.

Joseph could have behaved like the first actors in the Garden of Eden. When the Lord asked Adam why he was hiding from him after eating the forbidden fruit, his response was, "The woman you gave me..." (Genesis 3:12). In five words Adam managed to blame both God and the woman for his fatal mistake. The woman's immediate response was, "The serpent..." We have been pointing fingers ever since.

But Joseph chose another option than to save his own skin.

2. He chose to follow the law, but to temper it with compassion. We are told that Joseph was a "righteous man." This is no accidental designation. Calling Joseph a *righteous man* was actually Matthew's way of adding to Joseph's complications as to what to do. You see a *righteous man* was a *tsadiq* (pronounced tsa-DEEK). This Hebrew designation was given to someone who studied, learned, and observed the Torah fastidiously. This meant that Joseph recited the Shema and practiced its implications. "Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one" (Deut. 6:4). His diet was governed by the food laws; he supported the synagogue and observed the high holy days. There was no reputation higher for Joseph than to preserve his image as a *tsadiq*.

So Joseph has a dilemma. Mary has obviously stepped out on him and become a "common" woman. If he keeps up his relationship with her, then he is not one who is following the Torah. He might as well be eating ham sandwiches and hanging out on the street corners with filthy Gentiles. As a *tsadiq* he knew what the Torah required.

Mary had either been seduced into this pregnancy or she had been raped. If she had been willingly complicit, the Torah calls for the stoning of both parties. If she had been raped, then the rapist should be put to death. But, if no one confesses, the Torah says that Mary is to drink the "waters of bitterness." If she dies from the water, she is guilty; if she doesn't die, she is innocent.

So here is where Joseph finds himself: as a *tsadiq* he will do anything to follow the Torah. The woman he loves and wants to marry is pregnant. She claims her pregnancy is from God. If Joseph marries her, he loses his reputation. But, he asks himself, could Mary be right? Naw!

So Joseph intends to split the difference. He will uphold the law by deciding to divorce her since she has obviously stepped out on him. But he will temper this divorce with compassion by not holding her up to public ridicule, and simply divorce her quietly in the presence of two witnesses, which was required. He could swallow some pride and even take some hits on his reputation as a *tsadiq*, even as the rumors were flying. If he had to bear some shame, he was willing to do so. So in this decision, we see the character of Joseph coming forth.

3. But as Joseph is considering this option, the Lord has a third option in mind. "But after he 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' (Matthew 1:20-21). An angel of the Lord appears in Joseph's sleep in such a clear way that he realizes that Mary has not dishonored him, but this virgin teenager is carrying a baby whose origin is divine—of the Holy Spirit. God through His Spirit has planted a seed in Mary's womb that would produce the Savior of the World.

It is as if the Lord is saying, instead of defending your reputation by putting Mary away, I am going to ask you to risk your reputation and bear the shame of this union. When Joseph decides to go ahead and marry an obviously pregnant wife, can you imagine the conversation that he might have had with his father, Jacob? I can. He may have gone something like this:

"Joseph!", says his outraged Dad, "Joseph, what is going on here? Why aren't you divorcing this woman? She has obviously been unfaithful to you! Have you no honor. How dare you bring this shame on our family? Preserve your and our dignity. Be done with this woman. You are still young and eligible. There are other fish in the sea."

"Dad, let me explain. I was intending to do the very thing you are demanding. But in the midst of a dream, an angel appeared to me. Trust me on this one. He informed me...well, let me put it this way. The child in Mary's womb is not mine...nor any other

man's...this is God's child. I was told to name him Jesus, you know like Joshua, meaning God is salvation."

"Joseph, that is the lamest explanation I have ever heard. What do you take me for? Do you think I just fell off the turnip truck? I realize that explaining how sex works didn't come easy for me as a parent, but to invent this cockamamie story to cover-up your shame and blame God..."

So we can see the cultural pressure that was probably upon Joseph. In spite of what may have been personal doubts on Joseph's part, we see that he is a man of obedience. This is his distinguishing characteristic. This is Joseph's enduring legacy. The pattern that emerges in Joseph's response is to do what he is told. "When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home to be his wife" (Matthew 1:24).

What do we learn from Joseph about what obedience is all about? Two lessons can be derived from the model of Joseph's life.

1. Obedience is acting on what God has said to do.

This is the clear message Matthew intends to convey. Two other times an angel appears to Joseph in dream. First, an angel tells Joseph to flee from the terrors of King Herod who wants to kill the baby Jesus. "Get up, take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him. So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod" (Matthew 2:13-15a) Then when Herod had died and the way was clear to return, the angel appeared to Joseph again in a dream, "After Herod had died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead.' So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel" (Matthew 2:19-21).

Just as simply as this: God speaks, and Joseph acts. You might remember a bizarre story that occurred several years ago. Larry Walters, a 33-year-old man decided he wanted to see his neighborhood from a new perspective. He tied several helium filled weather balloons to his backyard lawn chair. He took a six pack of beer, a PB and J sandwich, and a BB gun to shoot the weather balloons when he wanted to return to the ground. Thinking he might get to 100 feet off the ground, he found himself at such an altitude that he was in the midst of air traffic pattern for the Los Angeles International Airport. He stayed airborne for two hours forcing the airport to shut down the runways. Following this incident he was asked three questions: "Were you scared?" "Yes." "Would you do it again?" "No." "Why did you do it?" "Because you can't just sit there."

"You just can't sit there." Joseph could have said that. God speaks, you do. Obedience is as simple as that. Obedience is a combination of hearing and doing. The Greek word for obedience is *hupoakouo*, which literally means *hyper-hearing*. In Hebrew there is one word for both hearing and doing. The Hebrews could not imagine hearing without doing. To hear from God is to do what he says. Jesus says himself, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

One of the key elements in what we call the Great Commission of Jesus is that the apostles are "to teach them to obey all that I have commanded you." Dallas Willard turns this on its head and calls this the *Great Omission*. In others words, we should be Nike Christians. If we were, we would be Nike Christians. What is the *Nike* slogan? *Just do it*. Don't just sit there, act.

Sometimes, what God wants us to do in a given situation is not all that clear. This was certainly true for Joseph before the angel informed him to take Mary as his wife. But there are other things, such as our financial giving, where the guideline is as clear as could be. We are told that God requires a tithe from us. If you can do simple mathematics, you can take your income and multiply by .10 and get an absolute number. Yet, it appears that a vast majority of the Christian community is either suffering from a math deficiency or we are clearly disobedient.

Joseph teaches us that obedience means "just do it."

If we claim to love God, then spend some time each day in his presence.

If we claim to love God, make sure that our children have prime time in our schedules.

If we claim to love God, intertwine our lives regularly with other believers.

God spoke, Joseph did what he said. This is his primary lesson to us.

2. Obedience requires faith and trust. It is evident that the Lord is asking Joseph to do something that goes against the grain. He has to put his reputation on the line to do what God tells him to do. He must risk his status as a *tsadiq*. So it takes faith, a stepping into the unknown, to be obedient.

Bishop Canon Greene told of his proposal of marriage to the woman who became his wife: He asked her, "Will you marry me?" She responded, "I don't know. I'm not sure that I love you." Not the response he was hoping for. Undaunted he pressed on. "Do you trust me?" She replied, "Oh, yes, absolutely, implicitly." "Good", he said. "That's all you need. Let's get married." Commitment is founded on trust.

You can't speak of obedience without faith and trust. The old hymn is absolutely true, "Trust and obey for there is no other way to be happy in Jesus than to trust and obey."

I like that phrase, "there is no other way to be happy in Jesus..." Jesus wants us to be happy in him. When we trust him by aligning our lives with him, then the result is happiness in us. Jesus said, "He who loses his life for my sake will find it." God's heart is delighted and divine pleasure that rests upon us when we trust in Him. In what we have come to know as the "faith" chapter in the Bible, Hebrews 11, we read, "By faith the men of old received divine approval...Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him" (Hebrews 11:2,6). Hebrews 11 captures the faith Hall of Fame. Each person mentioned was called to leave the security of his place and do something that seemed impossible. They were called to endure difficult times, often not even, like Abraham, knowing the destination where he was going or what awaited him there.

This was certainly true of Joseph who took his family to Egypt. I don't suppose there was a Holiday Inn for them to stay in during this sojourn. He was to stay an indefinite length of time, and then when called back home returned to Nazareth to reestablish a life. Obedience will take you on an uncertain journey. Some of you may be at that point of having to step into an unknown future with only God's assurance that He will be with you.

Faith is entrusting your future to the God who has his eye upon you. Brennan Manning tells an anecdote of a two story house that caught on fire. The family was on their way out of the house when the youngest boy became terrified, tore away from his mother, ran back upstairs. He suddenly appeared in a smoke filled window crying like crazy. His father, outside, shouted: "Jump, son, jump! I'll catch you." The boy cried, "But, daddy, I can't see you." "I know", cried the father, "I know. But I can see you." The boy jumped into his father's arms. Faith may seem like that. It may feel like a big leap into the dark that when you first trust God with your finances and begin to tithe. When you become convinced that more time needs to be spent with the family and less at work, this too can seem like a leap of faith with unknown consequences. God says, "Jump. I can see you."

Joseph was the father of the Son who came to do the will of His Father. Like father, like son. Joseph was from the beginning one who simply said, "Thy will be done." He was a righteous man, *a tsadiq*.

Let me conclude with a story that can help us cement the attitude of obedience that Joseph embodies and can lead us into our life with the Lord in the new year. Ben Patterson, currently the campus pastor at Westmont College in CA, tells of returning to a Christian Conference Center that had a formative influence on his faith during his college years. His five-year-old boy discovered the chapel where Ben had spent many an hour during those summers. Excitedly he grabbed his father's hand, "Daddy, do you want to see a very special room where people go and talk to God?" Ben acted like he had never been there before. Ben asked his son if he would like to pray. They knelt together and his son asked God to "please help Daddy to tell the people about you

tonight.” As they got up, his son noticed for the first time the stained glassed window of Jesus kneeling in prayer in the garden of Gethsemane. His son asked his father what Jesus was praying about. Ben said that Jesus was telling His Father that he was willing to do whatever he wanted him to do. His son said, “Was that all?” Ben replied, “Yes, that was all.”

Jesus says to us, “If you love me, keep my commandments.” So my question is to us all as this year comes to a close and a new one is upon us, “Do we have hearts so submitted to God that we are willing to search out and obey all that He has commanded us?” This is Joseph’s legacy to us. God spoke; he did what he was told to do regardless of its impact on his reputation.

As a point of application this morning, let’s take some time in quiet. What is one decision that is before you where you could say, “Lord, I only want to know your desire on this matter. What you say I will do”? It could be a relationship and how you could interact with someone. It could be a financial decision. It could be direction regarding a job. It may be dealing with a dark element in your own character—an interior battle of mind and heart. Are you willing to know God’s perspective and in that knowing, are you willing to do what He says?