

*The King Comes According to God's Plan*  
 Just Joseph  
 Matthew 1:18-25

*18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19 And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. 20 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. 21 She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:*

*23 "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
 and they shall call his name Immanuel"*

*(which means, God with us). 24 When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, 25 but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.*

- Matthew 1:18-25, ESV

### **What Makes a Just Man Just?**

Some people are easy to overlook, but that doesn't make them any less important. Other people insist on making themselves the center of attention, but that doesn't make them any more important. In the Christmas story, perhaps the most overlooked person is Joseph. The angels get whole songs written about them, as do the shepherds. Some people even put an angel on the top of their Christmas Tree. Of course, Mary is always center-stage, holding Baby Jesus – the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus. The wise men even get some songs, even if the most famous one mis-identifies them as three kings from the orient.

Joseph . . . Well, he's just Joseph. He's not really Jesus' dad, after all. It's almost as if we take verse 19 "*And her husband Joseph, being a just man*" and re-arrange it to say, "*And her husband Joseph, being just a man.*" Yet God didn't make a mistake when He gave verse 19 to us the way it is. When Matthew 1:19 says Joseph was "*a just man,*" it means he was a righteous man, as the same word means just or righteous.

This declaration about Joseph is an assessment of his character. While the term "just" or "righteous" often carries legal implications – to be justified is to be declared "not guilty" in a legal sense – it is also often a reflection of moral character, and these two aspects of its meaning are deeply connected.

So, this proclamation about Joseph should get our attention and prompt us to ask, "What makes a just man just?" And we can answer this question in two ways, in terms of the fruit or in terms of the root. In other words, we can look at what character qualities someone needs to display in their lives in order to be seen as righteous or just, and we can also look at the source of these character qualities. For Joseph, we'll begin with the fruit evident from this passage and then we'll dig deeper to investigate the root.

Whenever we're thinking Biblically about righteous character, we have to be careful to get our understanding of the root and the fruit and to avoid the errors of antinomianism and legalism. Antinomianism is just a really fancy way of saying lawlessness, an attitude that says that we as Christians don't have to follow any of God's rules, but

we can just freely follow our spiritual intuition and do whatever feels right in any given situation. So, basically, we're left without an objective, written standard on which to base our decisions and behavior.

The other error is legalism, which comes in many forms, two of which are most prominent: a legalistic obedience-based earning of righteousness and then various forms of perfectionism. Basically, the first form of legalism holds that we become righteous by our obedience to God's Law. We don't. The second holds that we can achieve some form of perfect obedience to God's Law in this life. We can't.

As we examine Joseph carefully, we'll see a good model of true righteousness, one which avoids both antinomian lawlessness and legalism.

### **A. Betrayal?**

Some people believe that difficulties shape out character, while others agree with novelist James Lane Allen, who famously said, "Adversity does not built character; it reveals it." For Joseph adversity came at a young age and in a deeply painful way. Joseph and Mary were betrothed; this is so much more than our modern engagement. It is a legally binding marriage arrangement, which requires a divorce to break. In other words, a betrothed couple is considered married, but they have not yet consummated their marriage or moved into their married home together.

When Joseph and Mary were betrothed, she was likely around 14 years old, and he was likely around 17 or 18 years old. The one-year betrothal period gave both bride and groom time to prepare for marriage. As a carpenter/craftsman (a word that also includes stonemason work), Joseph was likely using the betrothal year to build his marriage home for his bride and future family. It could also have been a time for Mary's family to save up her dowry.

It was during this exciting time in young Joseph's life, when he is building his home and establishing his business, that he learns that his young bride is pregnant. Joseph is not ignorant or foolish. He knows what this means: Mary has been with another man. This was a big deal. Rumors about this would circulate around Jesus for the rest of His life, as is strongly hinted at several times in John's Gospel, in particular.

Joseph had to process this information, and it is in the light of this news of apparent betrayal and his response to this deep adversity that we're told that Joseph was a just man – *"When his mother Mary had been betrothed 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."*

Joseph wasn't just going to go ahead and marry Mary anyway. He wanted to honor God and live uprightly.

### **B. Just Kindness**

And yet, Joseph was kind. He had a kind righteousness and a just kindness. What is a character of true righteousness? True righteousness is conformity to God's character, and God is just and kind; He is pure, holy, faithful, and good. Antinomianism tends toward a kindness and goodness without a standard of justice, purity, or

faithfulness. Legalism tends toward justice and upholding a pure standard without kindness or goodness. True righteousness, as a reflection of God's character, is pure and good, just and kind.

And so Joseph felt compelled to uphold God's standard for purity in marriage, but he was kind and unwilling to put Mary to shame. This was a valid option open to him. He could have accused Mary of infidelity and subjected her to a public trial. Stoning someone for infidelity was actually pretty rare in Joseph's day, so Mary probably would not have been stoned to death, but she certainly would have been subjected to very public and humiliating shaming. The fact that Joseph was unwilling to pursue this avenue shows not only his kindness but probably also shows us his genuine love for Mary.

Sometimes we can be driven by a very strong desire to right and to be proven to be right in the eyes of the world. We want others to think highly of us. We want to be vindicated. This shows that we value the opinions of others and we value our own status, reputation, or self-righteousness more than we value love and compassion.

### C. Faithful Obedience

For Joseph, even this more compassionate avenue of doing the right thing while guarding Mary from public shame was not something he rushed to do quickly. He had to think about it, to sleep on it.

*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. <sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:*

<sup>23</sup> "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall call his name Immanuel"  
(which means, God with us).

<sup>24</sup> When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife . . .

Joseph is considering these things - the verb here indicates that Joseph was carefully considering, pondering, turning the idea over in his mind. The ESV says "*as he considered these things*" and the KJV "*while he thought on these things*". He's wrestling with what the right course of action should be and how to do what seemed must be done.

I find the words the angel uses when he speaks to Joseph in his dream very interesting: "*Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife*" I think that shows that Joseph wanted to take Mary as his wife, to follow through on his commitment to marry her, but that he was afraid to do so, that he felt it was impossible to do so, given her pregnant condition.

Joseph's obedience in response to the angel's word is immediate and unhesitating. As soon as he awoke from sleep, he took Mary home as his wife. Joseph believed the word from God and he acted immediately in faithful obedience to the word of God. This is the real measure of the fruit of righteousness.

We consistently see this pattern of behavior from Joseph. Joseph never seems to get a face-to-face, real-life visit from an angel while he's awake. The angel (who is unnamed) always seem to speak to him in dreams. Thus, he has much in common with his namesake, Joseph, the son of Jacob in the Book of Genesis. That Joseph had dreams of the future and was gifted by God with the ability to interpret the dreams of others. This Joseph was given direction by God through an angel in his dreams. And nether Joseph seems at all interested in getting revenge but in doing God's will.

The angel in Joseph's dreams directed him to take Mary as his wife. Later, he would direct Joseph to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt to escape the wrath of King Herod and then to return and take Jesus north back to Nazareth. At each step, the angel's words are explained by Matthew by supporting Scripture So Joseph was not just acting in accordance with the words of the angel in his dreams, but also in fulfillment of Scripture:

*The Flight to Egypt: "Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son." – Matt. 2:13-15*

*The Return to Nazareth: "But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, "Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead." And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene." – Matthew 2:19-23*

So, if we can summarize the heart of the fruit of a righteous character, as seen in Joseph, it would be this: A concern for purity and compassion, for faithfulness and kindness, and a ready obedience to the word of God from the heart. But if you think Joseph is the hero of this story, then you've missed the point of the story. For all we have seen so far is the evident fruit of righteousness in the life of Joseph. We haven't yet considered the root source of this righteousness.

#### **D. Perfect Provision**

I think Joseph would be the first one to tell you that his righteousness did not come from himself. Joseph did not have a self-righteousness. He knew he was a sinful man who needed a Savior, and we can see this in his response to God's message of the perfect provision He was making for sinners who need salvation.

What was the message the angel had for Joseph? It wasn't just that Mary was still a virgin and had not betrayed Joseph. No, it was that the child in Mary's womb was the work of the Holy Spirit, the gift of God to the world: *"She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."*

The fact that Joseph obeyed this word and named this special baby Jesus shows us the most important thing about him: He knew his need for a Savior, one who would save him from his sins. By taking Mary home as his wife, by staying with her and raising Jesus with her, Joseph was demonstrating much more than just faith that

Mary had indeed been faithful to him. More importantly, so much more importantly, he was showing his faith in the promise of God and in the perfect provision of God in this foster-son, the Son of God.

One of my favorite modern Christmas songs was written in 1982 by Michael Card. It lovingly conveys the wonder Joseph must have felt at being the father of the Son of God and long-awaited promised King of Israel:

*How could it be this baby in my arms  
Sleeping now so peacefully  
The Son of God the angel said  
How could it be*

*Lord I know He's not my own  
Not of my flesh not of my bones  
Still Father let this baby be  
The Son of my love*

*Father show me where I fit  
Into this plan of Yours  
How can a man be a father to  
The Son of God  
Lord for all my life  
I've been a simple carpenter  
How can I raise a King  
How can I raise a King*

*He looks so small His face and hands so fair  
And when He cries  
The sun just seems to disappear  
But when He laughs it shines again  
How could it be*

As much as I love this song, I think it misses the most profound thought about Joseph. He heard very clearly from the angel why this special baby was to be named Jesus, a name which means salvation. He would be called Jesus for He would save His people from their sins. So, in addition to believing that this child was the Son of God, miraculously created in Mary's womb by the Holy Spirit, the long-awaited Messiah, Joseph had to believe that this tiny baby, growing in his wife's womb, was his Savior, the one who would save him from his sins.

Now, we have no idea exactly how much Joseph understood of how Jesus would bring salvation from sin to His people, but God has told the story over 700 years earlier, through the prophet Isaiah –

*Who has believed what he has heard from us?  
And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?  
For he grew up before him like a young plant,  
and like a root out of dry ground;  
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,*

*and no beauty that we should desire him.*  
<sup>3</sup> *He was despised and rejected<sup>[b]</sup> by men,*  
*a man of sorrows<sup>[c]</sup> and acquainted with<sup>[d]</sup> grief;<sup>[e]</sup>*  
*and as one from whom men hide their faces<sup>[f]</sup>*  
*he was despised, and we esteemed him not.*  
<sup>4</sup> *Surely he has borne our griefs*  
*and carried our sorrows;*  
*yet we esteemed him stricken,*  
*smitten by God, and afflicted.*  
<sup>5</sup> *But he was pierced for our transgressions;*  
*he was crushed for our iniquities;*  
*upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,*  
*and with his wounds we are healed.*  
<sup>6</sup> *All we like sheep have gone astray;*  
*we have turned—every one—to his own way;*  
*and the LORD has laid on him*  
*the iniquity of us all.*

- Isaiah 53:1-6, ESV

This, then, is the true root of Joseph's righteousness, not in his own obedience, but in the salvation Jesus would bring, salvation which Joseph received by faith in God's Promised One, the perfect provision for the people of God, the Righteous One, the Son of God and Savior of all who trust in Him.

### **What Makes a Just Man Just?**

So, what makes a just man just? We can see the righteous character of a person in his or her actions – in a willing obedience to God's word and a commitment to purity and compassion, to faithfulness and kindness, to loving God and loving others. But this is the fruit of a changed heart and a life, and we never reflect this inward change perfectly in this life. The root cause – what actually makes a just man just, a righteous person righteous – is being joined to Jesus Christ, the Righteous One, by faith.

On our own, we will always vacillate between antinomianism and legalism. We will think we can keep God's standard and be over-inflated with self-righteousness, until we realize we cannot, and then we will throw everything aside and throw our hands up in despair, "What's the point?" Self-righteousness never leads to true righteousness. Only when we realize our need and turn to Jesus for salvation do we find true righteousness in the One who was born to save His people from their sins. He alone is all our righteousness, and the only fruit of righteousness we will ever see in our lives is the fruit of His righteousness, given to us by grace, received by faith, and then worked into our hearts and lives by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is Jesus and Jesus alone who makes a just man just.

