

## **Joseph - A Portrait of Obedience**

**Matthew 1:18-25, Matthew 2:13, 19-22**

Why Joseph? I mean really think about it. Joseph is one of the most forgotten members of that first Christmas pageant. After all, the little we do know doesn't look too impressive on a resume. Joseph didn't have much money, and he was a carpenter. Now there's nothing wrong with being a carpenter but if you think about it, wouldn't it be more fitting for the father figure for the Messiah to be a powerful Governor, or a wealthy merchant or a teacher of the law or a respected ruler...I mean.... Why Joseph? Next to Mary, Joseph doesn't get much attention.

The fact is, it's often hard for a man to exist in the shadow of his wife...the male ego can be incredibly sensitive.... Think about the female movie stars who have married obscure, unknown men.... Those marriages often struggle because of the wife's notoriety...

**Remember when Senator BOB DOLE ran for President?**

**Many said his wife Elizabeth, who served, as the Secretary of Labor, would have made a better candidate.... She was so sharp and politically savvy. Once a photographer took a picture of Bob Dole helping his wife make the bed.**

**The photographer said, "It's nice of you to do that. Is it just for the picture?" And Bob Dole said, "Are you kidding? I make the beds all the time. SHE's doing it for the picture!"**

Joseph was a behind-the-scenes kind of guy who played his seemingly minor role with amazing integrity.... In fact, in all the Bible Joseph is never quoted—not even once. He seems as common as his name.

Why Joseph? Today I want you to see a Portrait of Joseph, which will help answer why his Heavenly Father entrusted him with the responsibility of being the earthly father to Jesus Christ. The Portrait could be summed up in one word—Obedience.

That is the quality that made this common man so uncommon. And although we don't know tons about him, when you begin to dig in to his life you'll see that all roads lead to Obedience. Let's learn three lessons from the obedience of Joseph. The first lesson is:

### **I. Obey When It's Embarrassing**

If you are familiar with the Christmas story you know that this was uncharted water. No engaged woman would say she was pregnant yet in the same breath contend that she had remained pure. No engaged man would believe such a story.

Now put yourself in Joseph's shoes. You are betrothed to a respected young woman who has been the picture of purity and a model of integrity. And here's what happens...

#### **Matthew 1:18, 19**

“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 through 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.”

Joseph basically had three options according to the law;

1. He could have her stoned to death for her unfaithfulness—but no one was that cold of an individual and so that right was seldom exercised.
2. He could bring her out in the marketplace and create a big scene and tell of her pregnancy and although DNA testing wasn't available at the time, believe me any engaged man who had been pure could give a convincing argument for how he wasn't the father. Women had no credibility in that culture. Such a speech and public spectacle would provide an outlet for Joseph's vengeance and pain while at the same time protect his good name in the community. Not a bad choice if you don't know the rest of the story.

But we are beginning to learn some insights about *Why Joseph* was chosen. You see, he opted for the third choice;

3. It probably wasn't utilized very often.

Matthew 1:19, "Joseph was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly."

In those days, back when women were often seen as property or producers of children this was an incredibly self-effacing act on the part of Joseph. By choosing this quiet route he was opening himself up for more accusations. Joseph chose this course of action, taking the high road *before* he receives any dream from God. That's impressive, that's obedience to a way of life that says "I will honor others above myself."

So Joseph extends grace and chooses to allow his fiancée to save face. Look at...

Matthew 1:20-24

"But after he had 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." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:

"The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"—which means, "God with us." When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife."

Notice Joseph was obedient, he immediately pushed up the wedding. And it says he took Mary home as his wife.

Obedience to Christ can be embarrassing at times.

- You might be embarrassed at a public restaurant to bow your head and pray for your meal...but you do it to express thanks.
- Your parents or your children might not understand how you could give 10% of your income to a church, but you want to obey God's word.

- Others in your field might shake their heads at you when they learn that you turned down the promotion because of the time it would take away from your children, but you say No anyway.

It's easier to gloss over the truth, or see if you can get by without disclosing all the details. But obedience demands that we follow through and be honest. That's not always easy and at times it can be embarrassing.

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But my embarrassment cannot hold a candle to what Joseph went through. Joseph was obedient to God's plan even though it was embarrassing to his reputation. This would have long-term consequences that would be embarrassing. Even years later when Jesus returned to Nazareth to teach some comments were made which cast doubt on his heritage and legitimacy. And yet Joseph was obedient in spite of what might happen. Not only did Joseph obey even though it was embarrassing, but secondly he shows us to

## **II. Obey When It's Inconvenient**

This situation for Joseph wasn't inconvenient just for the moment. This was terribly inconvenient for all of his adult life. And having a child this early in the marriage can be an inconvenience and bring additional stress. You're traveling by donkey for 85 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem with a woman who's due to give birth at any moment. But there were other inconveniences. There were numerous schedule changes that had to hamper Joseph's advanced planning.

Listen to just three of the last-second changes. If you are a detailed person, this would be incredibly frustrating. On several occasions Mary and Joseph had to stop what they were doing and totally MOVE.

Matthew 2:13 says, "When they (the wise men) had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "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."

And then sometime later, Matthew records for us...

Matthew 2:19-21, “After Herod 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.”

The next verse shares another change in plans.

Matthew 2:22 says, “But when he (Joseph) heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee,”

Years later Joseph has got to be thinking. “Nothing has happened lately. No dreams for years. Were they genuine or was it reaction to the Chinese Food I had the night before? Which was it? Did I just imagine those visions, after all Mary got angels right there in front of her, all I ever got was dreams? And if it really did happen then why all the midnight wake up calls and impromptu trips? I’ve got orders to fill, and chairs to build and the next morning my customers see that I’ve skipped town—no offense God but do you really have a plan that you are unfolding- or are you just making this up as you go along?”

Even though obeying the Lord was inconvenient at times, Joseph led the family and made certain that they followed God’s plan for the Jewish people, through their animal sacrifices and trips to the temple each year.

It’s easy to be obedient when it neatly fits in with what everyone else is doing - but it’s more difficult when it is inconvenient.

Bob Coy preaches in Ft. Lauderdale, he tells of talking with one of his members who had an ethical dilemma at work. Their boss was asking all of the waiters to turn in how much tip money they had been receiving. But all the servers had gotten together and decided to collectively each say that they were getting less than they truly were. If they played their cards right everyone might get a significant bump on their hourly wage.

Bob told the young man, that he had to be obedient to the Lord's calling on his life and tell the truth. He did turn in the accurate amount of tip money he had received. It was significantly higher than all of the others. Each week he kept turning in the true numbers and he became the brunt of hatred and opposition from his co-workers. The servers would look for opportunities to trip him or cause him to drop plates of food or spill drinks. The cooks began cooking his orders last. Of course the result was that his tips began to go down due to the delay for his guests.

But this Christian hung tough for weeks. Bob Coy said that the young man came back to his office sometime later and said, "Yesterday, the head of the restaurant chain was in and he wanted to see me. He asked if my tip numbers that I had been turning in had been accurate, and I told him they were."

The man said, "We're looking for managers for this organization who are honest and able to maintain their integrity—even when it isn't popular." And right then he was named the new manager of that very restaurant. And those co-workers who had made his life miserable for weeks—now would answer to him.

Now God doesn't always unfold His will that way—but isn't it cool when He does!! But notice it didn't happen overnight, it took time, and he remained obedient.

That's not easy. We have our own will; our own agenda and Joseph had to surrender his plan to God's plan. Frank Sinatra, sang *I Did it My Way*, but Joseph didn't—he did it God's way. The rumors were inconvenient, the constant moving was a pain, and the pressure of raising "God" would be quite unsettling. But Joseph waited on God's timing and through the years that must have been an incredible act of obedience and patience.

Obedience to Christ can be inconvenient to you at times.

- It may mean speaking up to a person in your section at the ball game whose speech is totally inappropriate.
- Or it may mean showing up for church even when snow is forecasted!
- Obedience may mean driving a separate car on an out of town trip

just so something doesn't give the wrong impression or appearance when traveling with someone of the opposite sex.

– It's inconvenient for parents to search high and low with their teens for modest yet stylish clothing, but obedience to Christ expects that to happen. Obedience may take the form as it did with Joseph of just loving your spouse and family and being open to the Lord's leading on when to move on and when to stay and serve.

One of my favorite stories is of Robert McQuilkin who used to be the president of Columbia Bible College and Seminary in South Carolina. Several years ago he retired in order to care for Muriel, his wife of 40 years. This once sharp woman was now lost in the fog of Alzheimer's disease. It had gotten to the point where she would walk the one-mile from their home to her husband's office at least five times a day.

I want you to hear what Robert McQuilkin said, when he made the announcement to the faculty and student body that he was retiring early. “.in my life experienced easy decision making on major decisions, but one of the simplest and clearest decisions I've had to make is this one because circumstances dictated it. Muriel, now in the last couple of months, seems to be almost happy when with me and almost never happy when not with me. In fact, she seems to feel trapped, becomes very fearful, sometimes almost terrified. And when she can't get to me, there can be anger. She's in distress. But when I'm with her, she's happy and contented. So I must be with her at all times. You see, it's not only that I promised, “In sickness and in health, 'til death do us part,” (and I'm a man of my word) but as I have said—I don't know with this group but I have said publicly—it's the only fair thing. She sacrificed for me for forty years to make my life possible, so if I cared for her for forty years I'd still be in debt. However, there's much more. It's not that I have to; it's that I get to. I love her very dearly, and you can tell it's not easy to talk about. She's a delight. It's a great honor to care for such a wonderful person.”

When you're not consumed with the inconveniences you can focus on being obedient and obedience can be incredibly fulfilling. But there's a third lesson and that is...

### *III. Obey When It Doesn't Make Sense*

If you are pure it grates at you to have your purity questioned. And then to wait longer would seem senseless. Listen to the level of purity of Joseph and Mary after the dream Joseph had.

Matthew 1:24, 25

“He did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son.”

The world would say to Joseph, “that’s senseless.” We find it difficult to wait for that privilege until we are married, but Joseph patiently waits for several more months.

Maybe he felt like it was the right thing to do in light of the unusual circumstances. Maybe he felt that timing would be more appropriate after the baby had been born. Maybe the angel mentioned for him to wait but the Scriptures just condensed the words the angel said to Joseph OR maybe it was this, maybe Joseph remembered Isaiah’s prophecy concerning the Messiah.

Isaiah 7:14

“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”

Sometimes God’s plan doesn’t seem to add up, but He knows what he’s doing. Perhaps He wants to show he’s trustworthy and at the same time test your obedience to Him.

In the Old Testament there was a respected commander named, Naaman. But he came down with leprosy, which in that culture was terminal and in time would slowly eat away all of his flesh. But in 2 Kings 5, the prophet of God Elisha tells him to go and dip in the Jordan river seven times and he’ll be healed.

Naaman tells his servant, that’s senseless. Why doesn’t he just wave his hand over me, or what’s wrong with the water in Damascus why the Jordan?

But the servant says, if he asked you to do something major, or difficult you would have done it, why not try this. So Naaman humbles himself & obeys.

And he must have looked at his skin after each dip, but there is not even the slightest sign of the leprosy dissipating. After the number six dip he looks the same as after his first immersion. And Satan, probably says, “You call this obedience Naaman? This is embarrassing, inconvenient and senseless. Walk out of the water now, because you are going to feel mighty foolish when you dip one more time and you’re still the same leprous loser you were before. And I guarantee you that the God in heaven will laugh and thank you for the entertainment.” But Naaman obeyed God, and he went down one more time and the Bible says,

2 Kings 5:14 So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.

And God wants our obedience EVEN when it doesn’t seem rational. As the years went by Joseph must have prayed, “When will everyone know that this young man is your son? When will my obedience be vindicated? And at times Joseph had to think—“this doesn’t make sense God.” But God was unfolding His will and using your obedience Joseph’s obedience to do so.

And so you still come to worship even when you don’t feel like it. Or, you put the brakes on the engagement because she’s not into living as if the Lord is the most important part of her life.

While those things may not make sense in your head or in your heart you choose to be obedient to the One who spoke the universe into existence! It is one thing to know God’s plan for your life, but it is something completely different to submit to his plan and obey it. Obedience flies in the face of our own self will and intellect. We think we have it all figured out.

Maybe you feel that you have waited a lifetime for God to unfold or explain his will, and yet God is up there saying, “You just dipped for the sixth time—hang in there, be obedient—it’s right around the corner.

I wonder where your heavenly Father would like to take you? It might not be where you’re expecting. Instead of humdrum and routine perhaps he wants to take you on an incredible adventure of faith, and service and fun but it begins with your obedience.

And so I say to those of you who have been waiting for a godly spouse, don’t lower your standards—trust your Father.

And to those of you who have been stuck in a job with no other Christians. –hang in there and trust your Father.

And to those of you who are considering buying into Christianity, today I encourage you to ...trust your Father.

The Bible reveals His good plan IF we will only be obedient to it. And your heavenly Father invites you to confess that you’re a sinner, repent of that, believe that Jesus is God’s son and be obedient in Christian baptism. Others of you could commit to membership today.