

MATHEW 1:18-25

⁸ This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about^[a]: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet^[b] did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

²⁰ 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. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus,^[c] because he will save his people from their sins.”

²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”^[d] (which means “God with us”).

²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵ But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

A MAN NAMED DAVE BARRY SHARED ONE OF HIS MOST VIVID CHILDHOOD MEMORIES OF CHRISTMAS.

IT WAS OF THE ANNUAL CHRISTMAS PAGEANT AT THE CHURCH HIS FAMILY ATTENDED.

ALMOST ALL THE SUNDAY SCHOOL KIDS PARTICIPATED AND, THE DIRECTOR ALWAYS TOLD EACH ONE WHICH ROLE HE OR SHE WOULD PLAY.

DAVE SAID, "SHEPHERD WAS MY FAVORITE ROLE, -- BECAUSE YOU GOT TO CARRY A STICK

PLUS, YOU SPENT MOST OF THE PAGEANT WAITING BACK IN THE CLOSET WITH THE ROPE THAT LED UP TO THE CHURCH BELL.

MANY WERE THE HAPPY REHEARSAL HOURS WE SHEPHERDS SPENT BACK THERE, IN THE DARK, WHACKING EACH OTHER WITH STICKS...."

HE ADDED THAT BEING A WISEMAN WAS NOT TOO BAD, BUT NOT AS MUCH FUN AS BEING A SHEPHERD.

THEN HE EXPLAINED: "NOBODY WANTED TO BE JOSEPH... JOSEPH HAD TO HANG AROUND WITH MARY WHO WAS PLAYED BY A GIRL.

YOU HAD TO WAIT BACKSTAGE WITH THIS GIRL, AND WALK IN WITH THIS GIRL.

...DURING THE PROGRAM JOSEPH TRIED TO KEEP THE MAXIMUM ALLOWABLE DISTANCE FROM MARY, AS THOUGH SHE WAS CARRYING SOME KIND OF DEADLY BACTERIA."

NEEDLESS TO SAY, BEING JOSEPH FOR BOYS OF A CERTAIN AGE ISN'T EASY. BUT SURELY IT WASN'T EASY TO BE THE REAL JOSEPH EITHER.

JOSEPH IS THE SILENT FIGURE IN THE CHRISTMAS STORY, HE THINKS AND LISTENS AND ACTS BUT NOTHING HE SAID IS RECORDED THE BIBLE.

LAST WEEK WE HEARD HOW MARY, ELIZABETH, AND EVEN UNBORN JOHN, ALL REJOICED BECAUSE MARY WAS CHOSEN BY GOD TO BE THE MOTHER OF HIS SON.

WHEN THE NEWS REACHED JOSEPH, IN WHATEVER WAY HE CAME TO KNOW IT, JOY WAS THE LAST THING HE FELT.

THERE WAS, HE THOUGHT, NO REASON TO REJOICE BECAUSE HE BELIEVED MARY HAD BROKEN HER BETROTHAL VOWS.

THEY WERE, BY THAT CEREMONY LEGALLY MARRIED, BUT DID NOT LIVE TOGETHER UNTIL THE OFFICIAL MARRIAGE CEREMONY.

HOWEVER, IF JOSEPH HAD DIED BEFORE THE FORMAL MARRIAGE MARY WOULD HAVE BEEN CONSIDERED HIS WIDOW.

THIS ALSO MEANT THAT ACCORDING TO JEWISH LAW, MARY COMMITTED ADULTERY IF SHE BECAME PREGNANT BY A MAN OTHER THAN JOSEPH.

SO JOSEPH, TO SAY THE LEAST, WAS DISTRESSED. AND HE SURELY FELT AT LEAST SOME ANGER OVER MARY'S APPARENT BETRAYAL.

HIS PRIDE AND SELF-RESPECT WOULD ALSO HAVE BEEN HURT, ALONG WITH HIS FEELINGS. SO JOSEPH STRUGGLED WITH HOW HE SHOULD RESPOND.

IF HE WENT THROUGH WITH THE FINAL STAGE OF MARRIAGE IT WOULD BE A PUBLIC DECLARATION, HE WAS THE FATHER.

HE WOULD IN THAT SENSE BE LIVING A LIE, EVEN IF THE ONLY ONES WHO WERE AWARE OF IT WERE THE TWO OF THEM AND GOD.

STILL, JOSEPH WAS NOT ONLY RIGHTEOUS, HE WAS ALSO A COMPASSIONATE MAN.

CONSEQUENTLY, HE DECIDED TO BREAK THE BETROTHAL BY THE LEAST HARMFUL WAY POSSIBLE, WHICH WOULD BE TO DIVORCE MARY PRIVATELY NOT PUBLICLY.

AFTER REACHING HIS DECISION, HOWEVER, JOSEPH MOST LIKELY FELT SOME SATISFACTION BUT LITTLE OR NO PEACE.

HERE WE ARE SHOWN THAT GOD GAVE JOSEPH THE TIME AND SPACE TO WRESTLE WITH THE UNWELCOMED NEWS ABOUT MARY.

THEN, AFTER HE CAME TO TERMS WITH WHAT HAPPENED AND HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS REACHED AN AGREEMENT WITH HIS COMPASSION, GOD STEPPED IN TO OFFER HIM PEACE.

PERHAPS, WE MIGHT WONDER, IF JOSEPH TOSSED AND TURNED A LONG TIME THAT NIGHT BEFORE FALLING ASLEEP.

BUT WHAT WE DO KNOW IS THAT HE DID SLEEP, BECAUSE GOD SENT HIM A MESSAGE THROUGH A DREAM.

AN ANGEL EXPLAINED THAT NO MAN FATHERED THE BABE IN MARY'S WOMB, BUT RATHER IT WAS BY THE POWER AND SPIRIT OF GOD SHE WAS PREGNANT.

JOSEPH WAS TOLD HE COULD BE AT PEACE OVER HER CONDITION AND MARRY HER IN GOOD CONSCIENCE.

HE WAS INSTRUCTED AS WELL TO NAME THE CHILD "JESUS". AND FOR A MAN TO NAME A CHILD IN THAT TIME AND CULTURE WAS FOR HIM TO CLAIM PATERNITY.

WHAT A CHALLENGE THE DREAM AND ITS MESSAGE MUST HAVE BEEN FOR JOSEPH'S FAITH IN AND COMMITMENT TO THE LORD HIS GOD.

SURELY, HE AWOKE MORE AT PEACE THAN HE HAD BEEN THE NIGHT BEFORE, IN SPITE OF THE MOMENTOUS TASK GOD SET BEFORE HIM.

LIKE MARY, JOSEPH EXPECTED HIS LIFE WOULD SOON CHANGE DRAMATICALLY AFTER THEIR MARRIAGE, AND IF THEY HAD CHILDREN-BUT THIS NEWS WAS UNEXPECTED.

THEREFORE, JOSEPH MODELS FOR US SEVERAL THINGS THAT CAN BE USEFUL IN OUR LIVES AS CHRISTIANS.

FIRST, HIS COMPASSION FOR SOMEONE WHO HE THOUGHT HURT HIM-WAS STRONGER THAN HIS PRIDE, WHICH WAS REVEALED BY HIS CHOICE TO QUIETLY BREAK OFF WITH MARY.

SECONDLY, JOSEPH BOTH LISTENED TO GOD'S WORD TO HIM AND WAS OBEIENT TO THE UNEXPECTED AND UNCERTAIN FUTURE TO WHICH HE WAS CALLED.

THIRDLY, WE SHOULD NOT OVERLOOK THE STRESSFUL THINGS THAT HAPPENED TO JOSEPH BECAUSE HE OBEYED THE LORD.

IT MIGHT BE USEFUL TO REMEMBER THIS WHEN WE WORRY BECAUSE OUR CHRISTMAS CELEBRATION TURNS OUT TO BE LESS HAPPY OR PERFECT THAN WE PLANNED.

AFTER ALL, THE IDEA THAT CHRISTMAS OUGHT TO BE A HOLLY JOLLY CARE FREE TIME-IS NOT REALISTIC.

WHILE IT IS GREAT IF WE DO HAVE A YEAR THAT FEELS THAT WAY-WE OUGHT TO REMEMBER THE FIRST CHRISTMAS WAS NOT CARE FREE FOR MARY OR JOSEPH

WHEN THEY ARRIVED IN BETHLEHEM, THEY HAD NO PLACE TO STAY AND NO ROOMS COULD BE FOUND.

THE KINDNESS OF THE INNKEEPER GAVE THEM A PLACE IN THE STABLE-IT WAS BETTER THAN NOTHING BUT NOT IDEAL.

THIS PART OF THE STORY REINFORCES THE FACT THAT FOLLOWING GOD'S DIRECTION DOES NOT ALWAYS MAKE FOR SMOOTH SAILING.

YET, JOSEPH WAS WILLING TO BE INTERRUPTED BY GOD, AND FOLLOW A PATH HE WOULD NOT HAVE CHOSEN OTHERWISE.

HE TRAVELED TO BETHLEHEM WITH A WIFE WHO WAS SOON TO GIVE BIRTH.

THAT WAS SOMETHING HE WOULD NOT HAVE HAD TO DO IF GOD HAD WAITED AND MARY HAD NOT BECOME PREGNANT UNTIL AFTER THE CENSUS.

NEXT, JOSEPH UPROOTED HIS LIFE WHEN HE HAD TO FLEE TO EGYPT FOR A WHILE, AND THEN LATER RETURN HOME TO LIVE IN NAZARETH.

JOSEPH ALSO HAD THE TASK OF BEING THE FIRST TO TRAIN HIS ADOPTED SON IN THE TORAH-AND THE DUTIES OF A JEWISH MALE.

IMAGINE HOW INTIMIDATING IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN TO BE THE FATHER AND TEACHER TO THE SON OF GOD AND THE PROMISED SAVIOR.

IN SOME WAYS HIS JOB WAS HARDER THAN MARY'S, WHICH AGAIN REMINDS US JOSEPH NEEDED THE GIFT OF PEACE MORE THAN JOY.

MICHAEL CARD WROTE A SONG CALLED "JOSEPH'S SONG", AND IN IT HE IMAGINES WHAT JOSEPH MIGHT HAVE BEEN THINKING ABOUT THE ROLE TO WHICH GOD CALLED HIM.

LISTEN TO THESE WORDS: "... 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 BONE, 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 FATHER TO THE SON OF GOD?

LORD FOR ALL MY LIFE I'VE BEEN A SIMPLE CARPENTER, HOW CAN I RAISE A KING?..."

THE ANSWER OF COURSE IS, HE COULD DO SO WITH GOD'S HELP, ALONG WITH HIS WILLINGNESS TO OBEY THE LORD.

SURELY JOSEPH WAS A MAN OF NOT ONLY OF GREAT MORAL STRENGTH AND BUT GREAT DEVOTION TO THE LORD.

HE, LIKE MARY, WAS WILLING TO ACCEPT THAT NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE IF GOD WANTS IT TO HAPPEN.

HIS FAITH AND OBEDIENCE PROVIDED HIM WITH THE PEACE OF GOD IN THE MIDST OF THE UNEXPECTED CHALLENGES AND BLESSINGS, OF BEING CHOSEN AS MARY'S HUSBAND..

AN ACRONYM OF HIS NAME COULD BE- J FOR JUST, O-FOR OBEDIENT, S-FOR SERVANT, E- FOR EARTHLY FATHER, P-FOR PEACEFUL, AND H- FOR HUMBLE

THOSE ARE WORDS THAT DESCRIBE EITHER JOSEPH'S CHARACTER, OR THE SIGNIFICANT ROLE GOD GAVE HIM IN THE DIVINE PLAN OF SALVATION.

IT IS, THEREFORE, A LITTLE SAD THAT JOSEPH IS SO OFTEN FORGOTTEN FOR THE VITAL ROLE HE PLAYED IN THE BIRTH AND RAISING OF JESUS.

INDEED, MORE OFTEN THAN NOT HE FADES INTO THE BACKGROUND OF OUR MINDS, AS WELL AS OUR CELEBRATION OF CHRIST'S BIRTH.

AND YET, THE GOOD NEWS ABOUT JOSEPH FOR US, IS FOUND THE FACT HE IS SILENT AND HIS ROLE OFTEN OVERLOOKED.

WE INDEED CAN BE ENCOURAGED WHEN WE DOUBT OUR ABILITY TO SAY THE RIGHT THING, OR QUESTION OUR OWN SIGNIFICANCE IN SERVING CHRIST.

MOST OF US DO NOT SEEM DO GREAT THINGS FOR THE LORD, AT LEAST NOT THINGS THAT ARE ACKNOWLEDGED, LET ALONE APPRECIATED, BY OTHER PEOPLE.

HOWEVER, LIKE JOSEPH WE STILL MAY DO SOME GREAT AND MORE IMPORTANTLY- VITAL THINGS FOR THE LORD.

AND, WHILE OTHER PEOPLE MAY OVERLOOK OUR FAITHFULNESS, OBEDIENCE, AND IMPORTANT SERVICE--GOD DOES NOT.

JOSEPH REMINDS US THAT IT IS OFTEN THE QUIET AND UNOBTRUSIVE ACTS DONE IN FAITH- THAT CAN MAKE THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ADVANCING OR INHIBITING GOD'S WILL AND KINGDOM.

AFTER ALL, JOSEPH DID FOR MARY AND JESUS THINGS THEY COULD NOT DO FOR THEMSELVES.

JOSEPH PROVIDED FOR AND PROTECTED THEM. AND BY OBEYING GOD HE SAVED THE LIFE OF JESUS THE SAVIOR.

CONSEQUENTLY, WHILE MARY IS SOMETIMES CALLED THE FIRST DISCIPLE OF JESUS, JOSEPH COULD BE CALLED THE SECOND.

THE TWO OF THEM, WE SHOULD REMEMBER, WERE THE FIRST ONES TO REVOLVE THEIR LIVES AROUND JESUS.

THUS, WE LEARN THAT WHEN IT COMES TO ADVANCING GOD'S KINGDOM BY PARTICIPATION IN CHRIST'S ON-GOING MISSION IN THE WORLD-EACH ONE OF US IS CALLED TO BE LIKE JOSEPH AND MARY.

WE, LIKE THEY WERE, ARE CALLED TO FAITH IN GOD, TRUSTING THE LORD'S PROMISES, AND BEING OBEDIENT TO WHAT GOD CALLS US TO DO OR NOT DO.

JOSEPH, IN PARTICULAR, SHOWS CHRISTIANS THE IMPORTANCE OF THOSE WHO WORK BEHIND THE SCENES TO SERVE JESUS OUR SAVIOR.

FURTHERMORE, THE VERY FACT JESUS CAME INTO THE WORLD TO SAVE US AND OTHERS, REVEALS THAT THE STORY OF HIS INCARNATION AND BIRTH IS NOT JUST HIS STORY.

JESUS' STORY IS OUR STORY AS WELL WHEN WE ACCEPT HIM AND THE GIFT OF SALVATION HE OFFERS.

IT IS OUR STORY BECAUSE AS IT SAYS IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN 3:16: "FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD THAT HE GAVE HIS ONLY BEGOTTEN SON, SO THAT WHO EVER BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT PERISH BUT WILL HAVE ETERNAL LIFE."

LET US PRAY: WE THANK YOU, HEAVENLY FATHER, FOR YOUR GIFT OF JESUS YOUR SON FOR OUR SALVATION. HELP US TO ABIDE IN THE PEACE, JOY, LOVE, AND HOPE FOUND IN HIS BIRTH, LIFE, DEATH, AND RESURRECTION. AMEN

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