

## MARY & JOSEPH: REAL PEOPLE, REAL PROBLEMS

Matthew 1:18-25

November 30, 2008/Crossroads Christian Fellowship/Pastor Joyce Anderson-Reed

I had a shock at the breakfast table this morning. I was drinking my coffee and reading through a copy of *The Nazareth Gazette* when I came across this item: Joseph, son of Jacob, grandson of Matthan, to divorce his betrothed Mary.

I couldn't believe it! Not Joe and Mary. Why, they were the most "in love" couple I'd ever seen.

I looked at my husband across the table, "Josiah, aren't you working with Joe the Carpenter on that new building across town?"

"Hmmm, yes. Good worker. Why?"

"It says here that he's getting a divorce."

"Yes, he mentioned it during our lunch break the other day. The man is devastated."

"Do you know what happened?"

"He wouldn't talk about it. But I heard a rumor that Mary's pregnant."

"What?! Is it his baby?"

"I don't know. Probably. Otherwise I'd think he'd be making a huge public scandal to clear his name. He's trying to keep it pretty quiet. I think he's protecting her."

"He must love her very much. This is so sad. They just seemed like the perfect couple."

And my thoughts wandered for a moment. Who would keep the house in Nazareth? Would Joe return the donkey Mary's parents had given them? And what about the baby? Would he spend Passover with one parent and the Feast of Tabernacles with the other? It made me want to weep. I didn't want to see them break up.

Seeing me blink away tears, Josiah reached over and touched my hand. "No one's perfect, honey. They're just real people with real problems. Maybe we should pray for them?"

I nodded and bowed my head. If anyone could restore this relationship, it was God. Maybe a miracle would happen for Mary and Joseph. That would be my prayer.

When you think about Mary and Joseph, what are the first images that come to your mind? The Christmas card picture of Mary on a donkey, with Joseph holding the reins and leading them to Bethlehem? Or the snapshot of Mary holding a newborn Jesus while Joseph looks in wonder and adoration over her shoulder? Or the image of Joseph in his carpentry shop with a young, eager

Jesus beside him learning the trade? Everyone looks blissfully happy and content. No problems. No worries. The perfect husband. The perfect wife. The perfect child. The perfect life.

But this story in Matthew reveals to us that appearances can be deceiving. Joseph, an upstanding, Jewish man--the Bible says he was known as a righteous man--finds himself in the middle of a drama he never imagined. The woman he loves, the woman he was betrothed to marry, has told him she's pregnant. And since he knows *he's* not the father, he feels betrayed at the deepest level.

To make matters worse, she's concocted an outrageous story that the child was conceived by the Holy Spirit and will be the promised Messiah. Pure blasphemy! Did she think he was stupid? He wanted to punch something. Instead he threw several of his best hammers across the room, watching as they bounced off the walls. His heart was breaking. Didn't she know how much he loved her? He would have given her the world. Why was this happening *to him*? He was a righteous man. He obeyed the Law. He loved God deeply. It wasn't fair. And now he had to navigate the tricky legal hoops to divorce the woman he'd hoped to spend the rest of his life with. His heart was heavy with grief. This wasn't the way it was supposed to happen. Yesterday it had all seemed so perfect. And today . . . today was such a mess.

Joseph's life was caught up in a scandal not of his own choosing. **In fact, the events were set in motion by God.** Which is a fascinating twist in this story. Because it reveals to us that when God decides to do something, he doesn't always look for public approval. God sometimes puts us in the middle of a situation that causes us to be the subject of gossip, rumor and speculation. People are thinking things about us, saying things about us, that are the opposite of what we know to be true. And it hurts. It's confusing. And we wonder "*What* is God doing?"

This is what was happening to Mary and Joseph. The people in town, the people at the local synagogue, the members of their family—they all had their opinions of what was unfolding right before their eyes. And their opinions were wrong. God truly was in the middle of what looked like the biggest local scandal to hit sleepy Nazareth all year. But from the outside looking in, most people didn't see God's fingerprints at all.

Even Joseph was struggling to see God's purpose in all of it. He was trying to discern what was the right thing to do. And despite the deep betrayal he felt from Mary, he had decided to pursue a quiet divorce in order to lessen her exposure to public disgrace. He was less concerned about his own reputation and more concerned about hers. That one action reveals a lot about Joseph's character.

There is the saying, "Your reputation is who people think you are; your character is who you really are." Joseph could have protected his reputation at all costs. But because of his love for Mary, he decided to take the high road. He thought of her reputation more than his own. He put her needs before his own. Despite the fact that he felt like she kicked him in the gut, ripped out his heart . . . he does the best thing *for her*. To protect her. To preserve her life. To save the baby that he knows isn't his. Because according to Jewish Law, he could have demanded that she be stoned for adultery.

A betrothal lasted for one year, and then the marriage took place. It was legally binding even though the marriage had yet to be consummated. So, by all intents and purposes, Mary and Joseph *were considered* married at this point. That's why Joseph considers divorce. That was his option according to the law. By deciding to divorce Mary quietly, Joseph knew that most people would assume that he was the father of Mary's child, and that the divorce was caused by a reason other than adultery. By divorcing her quietly, rather than publicly, he put his reputation at risk instead of hers. This one action shows us that he loved her very much. It revealed his character.

Your reputation is a one-dimensional picture that the public sees when they look at your life. Your character, however, is what God sees when he looks at your life, because he sees past the illusion into the reality of who you are. If you have character, God can use you, even if no one else can see your potential. And if you don't have character, God can't use you, even if all the people in the world think you're wonderful. (Courageous Obedience by Steve May)

As this story unfolds, we are seeing that Joseph was a man of character. When he discovered Mary was pregnant, he acted in a way that would reveal his character, not protect his reputation. That's why God was able to use Joseph. In the middle of one of the deepest struggles of his life, Joseph wanted to please God, to do what was right, to put Mary's needs before his own.

And after Joseph had considered all his options, agonized over what decision to make, had finally reached the conclusion that divorcing Mary quietly was the best course of action, the most righteous thing to do . . . God upped the ante. God adds a twist to the situation that seemed to say, "Okay, Joseph, let's see what you'll do now."

An angel of the Lord comes to Joseph in a dream and says, "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."

Do you hear what the angel is saying to Joseph? **Do not be afraid.** The circumstances that you think are leading to the death of your relationship are actually the beginning of your salvation. (For Better, But Worse by Daniel Meyer)

Do not be afraid.

Joseph must have thought, "Wow! Is this possible? In the middle of this mess God is creating a new beginning to save us? This baby is a blessing? My life isn't ruined. I *can* still have a life with Mary?"

Do not be afraid.

What are you afraid of this morning? Is your life a mess? Is it hard to see the blessings? From the outside looking in, is it hard to see God's fingerprints on your life? Is God inviting you to see possibilities in the midst of what seems like a disaster?

My Salvation is at hand, says the Lord God. Don't be afraid.

Can you trust God? Will you trust God?

Scripture tells us that when Joseph woke up, 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. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Joseph decided to take a huge leap of faith. He decided to trust God. Despite his fear, he decided to be obedient to God. To do what God said despite the fact that gossip would be 10x worse by taking Mary as his wife than if he quietly divorced her. He decided to be molded by God. To let God use him and work through him. Joseph's obedience opened the door for God's involvement in his life, and in the world.

Because stop and think for a moment . . . what would have happened if Joseph had not been obedient? What if he had decided to save his reputation and disgrace Mary? By law, she could have been stoned to death and the child could have died along with her. Joseph's disobedience could have brought God's plan of salvation to a screeching halt. Joseph could have played a role in the Son of God's death before the Son of God was even born. (Courageous Obedience by Steven May)

The ramifications of Joseph's obedience went far beyond his personal life. His act of obedience not only changed his life, but it changed the world forever. Because of Joseph's obedience, because of Mary's obedience, Jesus was born into our world, and through his life and death he paid the price for our sins. If Joseph and Mary had said "Sorry God, not interested. Pick somebody else, not me," then God's plan would have been thwarted.

So why is this important for you and me to think about this morning? Why do we need to take Joseph and Mary off their Christmas pedestal, and realize that they were real people with real problems like you and me?

Because the struggles they faced are the same ones you and I face today.

Has your marriage ever seemed worse, instead of better?  
Did you ever feel like you were at the center of the latest gossip?  
Did your perfect life seem to fall apart overnight?  
Have you ever been betrayed by someone you love?  
Have you ever struggled to do the right thing?  
Are you asking God what is the purpose of the latest heartache you're experiencing?  
Has God ever asked you to do what seems crazy and impossible?

Today, at this very moment in your life, where is God asking you to be obedient?

Because the consequences of your obedience may not always be immediately obvious. You may not be able to see it from this side of eternity. But the fact is, your obedience to the call of God on your life could change the lives of thousands—even millions—of people. (Courageous Obedience by Steve May)

Do you doubt that? Is your response to that statement a bit skeptical, or even cynical?

Let me tell you about Mordecai Ham. Have you ever heard of him? Probably not. He was a revival preacher in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. He traveled primarily through the south, preaching in tents. There were dozens of preachers like him in those days. And though he was reasonably well known during his time, there was nothing about him that would qualify him for inclusion in the history books. One night he issued an invitation for people to come forward and accept Christ as their Lord and Savior. It seemed a night like many others. On this particular night a teenager came forward, responding to the invitation. The teenager's name? Billy Graham. When Mordecai Ham responded to God's call to preach, he had no way of knowing the impact his obedience would have on the entire world.

When you say "yes" to God, your life will change forever. It will have a ripple effect that will change the lives of those around you in ways you'll probably never know.

Joseph and Mary's story shows us a God that takes imperfect people and, with grace and truth, transforms them into something truly beautiful. A beauty that changes the world.

That is what God is waiting to do with you and me. He wants real people with real problems. . . imperfect people . . . and he desires to pour his grace and truth over us, in us, through us . . . so that we are transformed into his likeness. As it says in Colossians 1:27 ". . . Christ in you, the hope of glory."

Like Mary and Joseph, God wants to use you and me to change his world. It comes down to obedience. Yes or No. What will your answer be?

Let's pray.

**Resources:**

Sermon "*Courageous Obedience*" by Steve May from PreachingToday.com 2008.

Sermon "*For Better, but Worse*" by Daniel Meyer from PreachingToday.com 2008.

*The Gospel of Matthew* by William Barclay. Philadelphia: Westminster Press. 1975.