

The Ministry of Joseph

I heard a pastor one time ask the question, “After so many years in the ministry, what can I say that is new and different about Christmas?” As I was thinking about what to share this Christmas, I was drawn to Joseph. We hear a lot about the magi. We hear a lot about the shepherds. We hear a lot about the prophecy and Jesus, and on goes the list of events that occurred that first Christmas. Then I thought how often do we hear about Joseph? So I was drawn to study and share Joseph’s role. As we look at Joseph from the standpoint of the Christmas story, I want you to think about yourself. I want you to think about God and your relationship with Him.

JOSEPH IS NOT THE FATHER OF JESUS. When we think about Joseph, one of the passages that comes to mind is Matthew 1:18. The verse reads:

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. Matthew 1:18 (NASB)

That is an interesting verse because it simply tells us the writer is beginning to describe the birth of Christ. The events being described are all about that birth. In this season we are thinking and talking about Christmas, and Christmas is all about Christ. This passage is focused on who Jesus

Christ is. We are told that “when his mother, Mary, had been betrothed to Joseph.” In those simple words, we are told that both of them were engaged. In verse 16, you get the distinct impression that Joseph is not the father of Jesus, because we are told,

Jacob was the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, by whom Jesus was born . . . Matthew 1:16 (NASB)

The message plainly is Joseph is not the father.

SURPRISE, MARY IS PREGNANT. Verse 18 also tells us that Mary was betrothed to Joseph before they came together. That means they were engaged to one another, and

before they came together, before they ever were married and had sexual relations, Mary was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. As I was thinking about this passage, I was really impressed with this word “found.” It is really a bland word in the



English Bible. There is no emotion to it. It just says “found.” But the Greek has a different idea. The Greek implies an element of surprise; so it was not just “found” or simply learning that she was pregnant. The idea is that a stunning shock was involved. If you were engaged to somebody and you thought that person was really committed to you as a godly woman, and all of a sudden you discover she is pregnant—like wow! That was Joseph’s situation.

In Luke 1 we learned that Mary knew about the virgin birth first because an angel came to Mary and told Mary that she was going to have a child by the Holy Spirit. In fact, it is noteworthy that Matthew and Luke agree. They say the same thing. The conception of the child came about by the Holy Spirit. That means a miraculous birth occurred. So I was thinking, why did Mary know first? Why did God tell Mary first, and not Joseph? Some might think that maybe Joseph should have been informed first, since he was engaged to become Mary's husband. But that is not what happened. I was wondering, why did things happen in that order? Was it because Jesus was going to be carried in her body? Should she have the right to know about it? In fact, maybe she would be given the right to decline, and then maybe somebody else would be Jesus' earthly mother. Maybe the mother would have been a Sarah, a Sally or who knows what the name might have been! Why was Mary told first? The scripture does not tell us. We have no idea; we can only speculate. All we know is that Mary knew first because she was told first.

So when did Joseph hear? Scripture tells us that Mary traveled up to visit Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-45). Then we are told that after she had been there for three months, she returned and was pregnant. Is that when Joseph found out? Did Joseph find out before she visited Elizabeth for three months? Or, did he find out after she had returned? When did Joseph find out? We are not told. All we know is that all of a sudden, she was found to be with child. When Joseph found out, it was a shock for him! Have you ever wondered how he felt? I imagine some of us have. I know I have. How much of a surprise was it? The phrase that comes to my mind for him is "poor guy." All of a sudden he was stunned; Mary was with child. Then he struggled.

Verse 19 says,

And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly. Matthew 1:19 (NASB)

This verse tells us something about his character. He was a righteous man. He did not want to embarrass her. He was going to break his engagement and put her away secretly.

That means he cared about her. He wanted to keep the situation as quiet as possible. That is the mark of a righteous man. This is a very interesting definition. Actually, a righteous man from the Jewish perspective would be one who believed in God and was trying to keep all the commandments of God.

Joseph was a righteous man. Therefore, he did not want to disgrace her. I think he was crushed. He had to have been crushed. There must have been tensions in Mary's home, but also in the home of Joseph. You can imagine that the parents may have talked with one another. You can imagine that the parents probably were upset that Mary was actually pregnant. We know their parents were not mentioned in the scriptural account. The angel did not involve their parents. God did not go to the parents and ask if they thought it was a good idea. The angel went to Mary and Mary alone. Somehow she had to explain this event to her parents and to Elizabeth. When Mary returned from visiting Elizabeth, then Mom and Dad found out. Then Joseph's parents would have been told. At that point both sets of parents were involved. What a disaster from Joseph's perspective.

Mary initially had been all excited. The angel told her this great thing was going to happen. But when Joseph was told, I would rather suspect he did not believe a word she said. Why should he? Therefore, he wanted to put her away. He did not believe her. I doubt his parents believed her, and probably her parents did not believe her either. I would suspect there was great heartache in the two families and poor Joseph was struggling.

JOSEPH'S MINISTRY. Verse 20 tells us what happened next,

But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit." Matthew 1:20 (NASB)

That is the second time in this passage we are told Mary had conceived by the Holy Spirit. In Luke it is only said one time. Here in Matthew it is said twice that the child was

conceived by the Holy Spirit. God wants to make sure that readers know that. But what happened? An angel came in a dream and spoke to Joseph. We are told that the angel said, “Do not be afraid.” Besides being startled by the appearance of an angel, of what do you think he was afraid? Do you think there was pressure from his parents not to marry Mary? I think so! Just imagine if he had gone ahead and married her, what kind of trouble do you think he would have had from his parents? Do you think his parents would have been happy with what they thought was a bad decision? If he had married her, he might never have heard the end of his parents’ criticism and complaining about what he had done.

How about ridicule? Do you remember from John 8 the woman who was caught in adultery? The Pharisees brought the woman to Jesus. It had to be a scandalous situation. I would suspect that the woman was in great sorrow. Maybe she was crying, and the Pharisees were testing Jesus. Jesus did the right thing; Jesus always does the right thing! Jesus forgave her and told her to go and sin no more.

Just imagine the scandal that would have occurred if Joseph had gone ahead and married Mary! Well, he did! I am sure, though, he was thinking about the scandal that would have come—not only from his parents telling him he had done a bad thing, but from the townspeople. The scandal must have been great. Poor Joseph - embarrassment, humiliation, and scorn were his. The angel said in the dream, “Go ahead and take Mary as your wife.” I want you to think about something for a minute. That was to be his ministry! That would be Joseph’s ministry for the Lord and to Mary. The angel in that dream told Joseph that “this is your ministry, to take care of your wife. Marry her, because the child that is going to be born is the promised Messiah.”

All of my adult life I have purposed to be a godly layman in the church. As I matured in my twenties and thirties, I wanted to be a man who grew spiritually. I was involved in a couple of influential churches that God *used* to shape my life. I wanted to be a man who knew the Word of God. I wanted to provide support to the pastor of my church. I wanted to grow spiritually. I wanted to be a man God could use in whatever capacity He wanted to use me. As I look

back over my life, I see that God has given me wonderful opportunities. I went to a Christian college, BIOLA (Bible Institute of Los Angeles). Now it is known as BIOLA University. I had an opportunity to be in a couple of significant churches. I had an opportunity to receive training and to minister in a variety of ways. God gave me those opportunities.

As a result, I have discovered that ministry is not about money. It is not about music programs, numbers, or statistics. It is not about any of those things. Ministry is about Jesus Christ. It is ministering for Him and serving Him. I have discovered something else—ministry meeting needs. Or put it another way, the need is the call in the ministry. There are some people who would think that the ministry for God is something you choose to do. You say, “I do not want to do this, or I do not like to do that. I only do certain kinds of things.” I have found that is not how it should be.

To give you a simple example: When someone calls at ten o’clock at night and says that they have experienced a tragedy and need help, how do you respond? We should not respond with, “I am just going to bed. Good night.” Ministry is responding to the need. When a need comes along, that is the opportunity for ministry. I heard a pastor on one occasion make the comment that he had to make sure that he kept his priorities, and not let the urgent things impact your life. If you live by that philosophy, then you will cut off ministry to a lot of people, because the ministry is often about the urgent. I found that the ministry is about training men and women. One pastor cannot take care of meeting all the needs in the congregation. A church body needs to work together to meet all of the opportunities to serve. Ministry is about sacrifices. I have had to learn the hard way. It is hard, because I do not always get to take care of myself while taking care of others.

That was Joseph’s ministry. The angel said, “Hey, Joseph, quit feeling sorry for yourself; it is time for you to take care of Mary.” Let me put it another way: Mary’s pregnancy was the need. That became his ministry. The need is the ministry. It is not the glitter of a church. It is not whether or not you have this or that. Think about what happened to Joseph. Joseph needed to marry this woman whose pregnancy was

going to be an embarrassment, who was going to cause him scorn, and whose parents probably were upset thinking that he had fathered a child prior to marrying their daughter.

Then he had to travel all the way to Bethlehem, take a bad journey during a bad time of the year. He would end up in an inn that did not have room for them so they would lodge with the animals. The baby was born in a manger and we are told in time that he was poor. Wow, what a ministry! Most of us would not sign up for that kind of ministry. Most of us would say that “this is not exactly what I had in mind. This is not my concept of ministry.” That was Joseph—poor Joseph. And the angel said, “Take Mary as your wife. The child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.”

Verse 21:

She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins. Matthew 1:21 (NASB)

At this point I would suspect that he was becoming a little excited as he realized that this baby was unique. What we miss sometimes is that Joseph was going to be the one who named the child Jesus. That was the custom in those days. The father named the child. It was not Mary’s choice. It was his choice. That is why the angel told Joseph what the name of the child should be. So Joseph named the child.

JOSEPH FULFILLED PROPHECY. Verse 22 reminds us of the ancient prophecy in Isaiah.

Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL,” which translated means, “GOD WITH US.” Mathew 1:22-23 (NASB)

Can you imagine what is going through Joseph’s mind at this point? What an incredible ministry he had! But we know that there were many struggles and trials all along the way. The journey did not come for free. It was not all glorious. There was difficulty and struggles along the way in doing this. Verse 24 says,

And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife . . . Matthew 1:24 (NASB)

Do you realize what that means? That means that not only was Joseph a righteous man; he was also a faithful man. In addition, he was a sacrificial man. He was willing to sacrifice himself for his wife. It is incredible when we think about what actually happened. And we are told,

. . . but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus. Matthew 1:25 (NASB)

Now I have to admit there are some people who would really struggle with that last verse. Apparently Joseph did not. Apparently Joseph did exactly what he was told to do. He was faithful. Watch this: he had a ministry. His ministry was to his wife, because she was going to bear a son, *God in human flesh*, who was to be the Savior of the world, to forgive us of our sins. We know what happened next because Luke 2 says Joseph took Mary to Bethlehem. We are told there was no room in the inn, so they ended up in the area where the animals lived. The baby was placed in a manger, which was not exactly the greatest place for God in human flesh to live, but that is what happened. Then the Scriptures tell us that the shepherds arrived. It is unbelievable when you think about what actually happened. Luke 2:10 says that an angel stood before the shepherds and said,

Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. Luke 2:10-11 (NASB)

That was incredible news! The shepherds left their sheep to look for Jesus. They found Mary and Joseph and the child. Jesus was in a manger, wrapped in swaddling clothes, and word about Jesus spread from there. Then we are told the child was named Jesus. We already have learned that Joseph named the baby.

I want you to think about Jesus and Joseph for a moment.

Joseph was of the line of David, and consequently Jesus was a descendant of David and had the right to be a king, the Messiah, and one day to sit on David's throne in a future kingdom. Joseph was a righteous man whom God chose for a very important ministry - to care for and provide for Jesus and His mother. His ministry facilitated the birth of the Holy God-Man, destined to be our Savior. Originally Joseph wanted to put Mary away silently, secretly because he was a righteous man. But because of the angel's visit, this righteous man obeyed. He did what was right. Joseph was humble enough to submit, to minister to and assist Mary.

We are told that Joseph was poor. Scripture tells us that Jesus became poor. Joseph ministered to Mary, and we are told in the Gospels that Jesus ministered to everybody. Mary is important. But it was Joseph's ministry that resulted in Mary's arrival in Bethlehem so that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem and fulfill prophecy. With God's help, Joseph had a significant role in the fulfillment of messianic prophecy. It is incredible when you think about Joseph. All too

often we exalt Mary to a place that diminishes Joseph. There are many good men in our churches today who are ministering behind the scenes and sacrificing for God. I am not talking just about pastors. I am talking of men in all roles in a church—righteous men. I think it is really important that men hear that Joseph was a godly example of a man, and yes, he was a great man.

CONCLUSION. Think about something else. When Joseph ministered to Mary, he did it for all the saints too! Why did he do it? Because there was a need for Mary to go to Bethlehem in order to give birth to the baby Jesus. As a result, in time because of our need, Jesus became the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Those are some thoughts I had about Joseph. Today we can rejoice because of what Joseph and Mary together did. Both of them fulfilled prophecies so we today can rejoice in the birth of Jesus. We can also remember with joy Jesus' death on the cross. He suffered and died because of our sins, making it possible for us to accept God's gift of salvation.