



"A voice is heard in Ramah,
weeping and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children
and refusing to be comforted,
because they are no more."

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. But when he 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, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene (Matthew 2:18–25).

Many of us have a Nativity set we put up at Christmas. There's always the obvious cast of characters. There's the baby Jesus in the crèche. There's Mary. There's all the animals—donkeys, cows, and chickens. There's the wise men. You can always tell who they are because they wear crowns. But then there's always some extra figures and no one knows exactly their identity. Have you ever wondered, which one is Joseph? Is he the old man leaning on his staff? Is he the young shepherd with broad shoulders? Often times no one really knows.

In reality, when it comes to the Christmas story, Joseph is like an extra, a minor character in a cast of stars. No one's ever considered him central or significant to the story of Christmas. In the Scripture, he's talked to and he's talked about, but not a single word comes from his mouth. Even though there are 15 cities and countless schools in our country named after him, Joseph is a rather neglected character in the story of Christmas.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "What you do speaks so loudly I can't hear what you say." Perhaps the Gospel writers wanted us to know, when it came to Joseph, what he did spoke so loudly he didn't have to say anything. Joseph was an incredibly simple person, but he was simply incredible in one outstanding quality—his obedience to God. It's in his obedience that Joseph is a silent but powerful witness of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Put yourself in Joseph's shoes. He's a small town carpenter engaged to be married to the girl down the street. One day, his world comes crashing down on him when he discovers she's pregnant. As he's trying to figure out what to do, an angel appears in a dream saying go ahead and marry her because the Holy Spirit did it. Before you know it he's swept into a remarkable chain of events: A manger birth heralded by shepherds. A panicked flight to Egypt because the baby was a threat to King Herod. And then a cautious return to Israel where he settled his family in the small village of Nazareth. Joseph must have felt like he was in God's witness protection program.

Finally, in Nazareth he had some quiet years. His dreams were half-forgotten, and it must have seemed Jesus was a pretty normal kid, except he was perfect! Imagine how all this must have hit Joseph. Up until now, the biggest decision he's ever made is which grain of wood matches a broken table leg. Now he finds himself in the middle of some of the great issues of the ages. Yet each step along the way Joseph simply obeyed.

Simple Obedience

The most remarkable thing about his obedience was its simplicity. In the first couple of chapters of Matthew, Joseph receives a number of messages from God. Each one comes in a dream where the angel of the Lord speaks to him. First, he's told to take Mary as his wife. Then, sometime after Mary gave birth, it says, "*When they 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'*" (v. 13). Then, after who knows how long, we read, "*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'*" (verses 19–20). But that's not all. Once he arrived in Israel the natural place to settle would be Bethlehem of Judea. "*But when he 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,...*" (v. 22).

That's four different occasions God communicated to Joseph through an angel in a dream. It's easy for us to think, "Well, if God ever showed up to me in a dream I'd obey too!" But, I'm not sure God's will was so clear for Joseph. In that day rabbis were divided on the value of dreams. Some thought dreams were worthless.

Others said they were prophetic. Still others said it all depended on the dream; some were true and others false. The point is it all wasn't as clear as we might think. Joseph had the hard job of interpreting and determining the worth of his dreams.

Have you ever sensed God was telling you to do something; it seemed clear at the time but you still had doubts? You pray. You try to check it out with the Scripture. You run it by a few friends. You're still not sure you got the message right. That's how it must have been for Joseph. And yet, in each instance, he simply got up and did what he believed in his gut God was telling him to do.

He does so without questioning. This must have been refreshing to the angel Gabriel. In the first two trips he made, he didn't get that kind of response. When he visited Zacharias to tell him he'd soon be the father of John the Baptist, he denied it was possible saying, "I'm an old man, and my wife's well beyond her child bearing years." Even Mary had a question for Gabriel when he announced her pregnancy. But, Joseph responds without any questions. And it wasn't because he knew all the answers. He was just one those guys who didn't **have** to know all the answers.

His simple obedience is remarkable in its immediacy. We never see him stalling. He just does what he's told without questioning. We don't have to have all the answers to obey. Nor should we expect to be given the luxury to obey on our own time schedule. Selective obedience isn't obedience; it's merely convenience. When God speaks to us in his Word he desires simple, unquestioning, immediate obedience.

Compassionate Obedience

He also models for us a compassionate obedience. When he found out Mary was pregnant he had a decision to make. He was "pledged" to be married to Mary. Back then that was something more than engagement and less than marriage. It began when a young man went to the home of the girl's parents and got their consent to marry her. A bride price was paid and a binding agreement was made which could only be ended by a legal divorce. But the girl would continue to live at home and the marriage wouldn't be consummated for another year. During that time, any involvement with another person would be considered adultery.

It was during this time he discovered Mary was pregnant. The Old Testament law said she should be stoned but at that time that rarely happened. Instead, Joseph would be required to divorce Mary so he wouldn't be implicated in the sin. But he could do that in one of two ways. The normal way would be to make the reason for the divorce common knowledge and thus expose her to public shame. Such a woman would be hard pressed to ever find another husband. Or, he could do it quietly by a simple document and two witnesses without making the reason known. With that in mind, we can understand what it means

when it says, "Because Joseph was faithful to the law, but did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly." The idea is as a lawful man he couldn't marry her. But, as a compassionate man he couldn't bring himself to publicly disgrace her. Joseph was upright without being uptight. He didn't have that kind of cold legalism which says, "I'm going to obey the letter of the law regardless of what it does to her."

I know a lot of upright people, but often they're cold and indifferent to the pain of others in the process; few are full of both truth **and** grace. Often, we want so much to be obedient in a given situation we lose sight of what God desires: love, mercy and compassion. We're afraid of being viewed as compromising the truth and so we hold the truth and apply it in a way that annihilates people in the process. Usually it's people who are already wounded who get the most hurt. But it's so much easier to be black and white. Think of all the personal heartache Joseph could have avoided if he just obeyed without any concern for what it would do to Mary. It's much more difficult and even complicated to be both compassionate and obedient, but that's what Joseph teaches us.

Courageous Obedience

Joseph also teaches us a courageous obedience. The first time he came to Joseph the angel said something very strange, "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife." Why did he say that? He didn't say, "Don't be too angry to take her" or "Don't be too embarrassed to take her." I wonder if Joseph had a holy hunch there was something mysterious about this pregnancy. Maybe when he heard the angel's words about Mary being pregnant by the Holy Spirit he began to back off in fear of the awesome power of God. When he saw such a holy thing happening, he probably felt, "I don't want anything to do with this; I'm just a carpenter."

God had come close, very close, and it scalded him with fear and awe at the power of God. You see the same thing in Luke 5 after Jesus tells Peter where to throw his nets and Peter hauls in a miraculous catch. It doesn't say Peter was overcome with joy, but with fear. He knelt down and said, "Depart from me. I'm a sinful man." When God draws close and invades our world with raw power, it can be overwhelming. Joseph would much rather have gone back to his carpenter shop and played with his tools than raise God's Son. The truth is in the face of God's commands it's easier for us to go back to our comfortable, safe, predictable activities than to obey God in a radical way.

We all feel that when God comes close to us. We like our little Nazareth's. We like our predictable routines; our cozy circle of friends. But then Almighty God comes along and gives us a glimpse of his power and love and we know we're being invited into something that will disrupt our whole way of life. Everything made sense before; we were in control. There may be

a strong attraction to God's plan, but we're tempted to resist it out of fear.

Maybe God is laying his hand on your life in a way that means change. Your first reaction is fear. Maybe instead of staying in a job you know he's calling you to leave, but you're afraid. Maybe he's calling you into some form of ministry or service, but you don't feel equipped. Maybe you're one of those folks who comes to church on Christmas and Easter and you know God is calling you to more; to be all in. You're afraid of how that might change your life. Like Joseph, overcome your fears and obey.

Painful Obedience

Joseph also teaches us obedience is sometimes painful. It has a price attached to it. God told him to marry a woman everyone could see was already with child. That was costly. This was a carpenter whose clientele depended on his reputation in the community. He couldn't afford to be the source of back-street gossip in Nazareth. But, he went along with it. Then he had to drop his tool chest and flee for Egypt. That was at least a 40 mile trek. In light of all we're reading these days about refugees and immigrants, consider the fact that Joseph and Mark were both. It couldn't have been easy. There were other Jews in Egypt, but they were all dirt poor.

Even the naming of this child was painful for him. Jesus is a fine Jewish name, meaning "God is salvation." But to name a baby was a big thing to a Jewish father. It took place in a public ceremony eight days after birth and it was the father's prerogative to name his first-born son; he usually named him after a grandfather. Joseph didn't have that privilege; at least with this child. He was told what to name him, being reminded from the start he really had no claim upon this boy. Even when the angel speaks to Joseph about what to do with his new family, he refers to them over and over again as "the Child and his mother." He doesn't say, "Your wife and son..." It's like Joseph had all the responsibilities of fatherhood but none of the privileges. I'm sure he felt like a stepfather in all of this. It wasn't really his son but he still had to change the diapers and pay the bills. He didn't have the joy a father has when he sees his own face in his son's face. He didn't have the joy of honoring his own father with a namesake. But somehow Joseph was willing enough to accept the responsibility without the privileges.

Obedience can have consequences. There was a recent President of the United States the press nicknamed "the Teflon President." They called him that because nothing seemed to stick to him. Regardless of the wrong he was alleged to have done or said, the public loved him and nothing stuck to him. It seemed to have no consequences. Well, Joseph wasn't teflon in his obedience. He reminds us that obedience is often painful; there's a price tag attached to it.

I've been thinking about how this all impacts me. As I've shared with you, last year I was asked by an organization called Baseball Chapel to serve as Chaplain for the Giants. I've been a Giants fan my whole life; who would turn down that gig? I have pretty much unlimited access to the clubhouse. I get to hang around guys we all know and love. And, in so many ways, I'm still kind of pinching myself. But what I've found is the ministry part of it isn't all that easy. I'm a guest there. I serve at their pleasure. And for the first time in a long time I'm a rookie. These are professional baseball players who can be very guarded for good reason; everybody wants a piece of them. Once the glamour of being around these guys wears off, there's real ministry to do and that's not always easy. I'm not there to be a fan. So I've had to come back to the fact that I believe God called me there. It comes down to obedience. Wrestling with this has given me a new appreciation for Joseph, who was obedient even though it was painful.

Influential Obedience

But there's good news in all of this. Joseph also teaches us obedience makes a difference. You've heard of the cliché, "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree." Think of that in relation to Joseph and Jesus. The most distant parent-child relationship in America is the one between fathers and sons. That wasn't true in the carpenter's shop at Nazareth. Think about it. Jesus was the one who taught us for the first time to address God as our Father. He used the word "Abba" which is an intimate form of address. No doubt that's the word Jesus used for Joseph. Many today have trouble calling God "Father" because their earthly fathers treated them so poorly. Whatever happened in the carpenter's shop in Nazareth it was such that Jesus could use a label for his Heavenly Father he'd used for his earthly father.

Not only that, I believe Joseph's obedience rubbed off on Jesus. Every quality of obedience we've seen in Joseph came to fruition later on in Jesus. Like Joseph, Jesus' obedience was simple, compassionate, and courageous. It was also painful. The Bible says Jesus "learned obedience through things he suffered." I know he was the Son of God, but I also know he learned some of that from Joseph. In Joseph he'd seen a man willing to say, "Lord, I'd rather be just a simple carpenter with a respectable family, yet not my will but yours be done." Later, in the Garden of Gethsemane, with hot sweat of blood running down his face, Jesus would echo those same words to his Father, "Not my will but yours be done."

Obedience has a long term pay-off. We may not get to see that pay-off this side of heaven. Joseph never got to see his son preach a sermon or perform a miracle. He never got to see his son's message sweep across the Roman Empire and change the course of history. Joseph died in faith, but there was a pay-off.

When his adopted Son was raised in glory, Joseph was there to greet him.

In the Louvre in Paris there's a 17th century painting called St. Joseph in the Carpenter's Shop. It shows a sturdy, rugged Joseph in his shop. The only other figure there is Jesus at 10 or 11 years of age. He's holding a candle, which is the only light. He's looking attentively at the graying Joseph build something. In the shadows at the bottom of the picture, you can barely see what Joseph is building. It's a cross. Now I'm sure that Joseph didn't build the cross Jesus was hung on, but I do think it was in that carpenter's shop Jesus learned the obedience that led him to die on the cross for helpless sinners like you and me.

So how do we put Jesus at the center of our Christmas? Start by taking time to ask God, "How can I grow in my obedience to you?" There's a dog training video where the trainer talks about what's called the 30-minute down stay. The idea is to get your dog to lay down in the midst of activity for 30 minutes straight. Trainers say this is foundational behavior between dog and master. Why? Because when your dog can do this, he accepts that he receives more happiness and satisfaction in obeying his

master than following his own desires. Until that 30 minutes benchmark is achieved, your dog continues to think he knows the best way to make himself happy. Dogs are made to fit into a social environment of authority. They're happiest under the authority of a good master.

I wonder if the same thing is true of us? Maybe some of us need to take a 30-minute down stay. We need to take some time and stop doing what we're doing and reflect on what God is calling us to do; what the next step of obedience looks like. Maybe there's an area of your life where God has spoken and you're hesitating. Perhaps God is calling you stay in a tough marriage, or to get out of an unhealthy relationship, or to be more generous in helping those in need. Maybe you have been checking out this Jesus-thing for awhile and it's time to make a commitment; time to ask him into your life; time to trust him as your Savior and Lord. Whatever it is, you know what it is, and you can let Joseph be for you the catalyst to make it right.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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