



How many of you have a nativity set at home? We have one too. It consists of the usual cast of characters in the Christmas story. Of course there is baby Jesus in a cradle with hay front and center. There is Mary, bowing down to Jesus, the only woman in the group. There are three wise men; that you can tell because they each are carrying a gift. There are a few shepherds that are identified by their staffs or sheep. There are some animals and an angel or two. The problem with my nativity set is that it's kind of hard to identify Joseph. I seem to always get him confused with one of the shepherds. So, in my family, we have to place everyone else in and around the manger and whoever is left usually turns out to be Joseph. That's fitting because Joseph is the forgotten man of Christmas.

When you look at the Christmas story in the Bible, Joseph never says a word. He is totally silent. Joseph is like one of those extras cast in movies; you know they are there but they are not significant in the movie. They never say anything. Joseph is like that. He says nothing. You hardly notice he is even there. But maybe that is intentional. Maybe that is a clue for us to look deeper into his life. The power of Joseph's story is not in what he says but in what he does. He was silently obedient to God. Joseph's story is found in Matthew's Gospel.

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: 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. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly (Matthew 1:18–19).

Joseph's Plan to Divorce Mary Quietly

Whenever I read the Christmas story, I end up feeling bad for Joseph. Life doesn't always work out as planned, does it? Sometimes life throws us a curveball. Often times it's God who throws the curveball. Think about these events from Joseph's perspective. In that day and age people got married really young. Girls would get married at 12 or 13 years old; boys were a bit older. If you have a junior higher, think about that! And people back then didn't marry for love. They would have been set up by their families. A year before the actual marriage ceremony would take place, the couple would become betrothed. Unlike being engaged, betrothal was a legal, binding agreement that could only be voided by divorce or death. During the betrothal

time, the couple were actually known as husband and wife, although they did not come together sexually yet. During their betrothal, Joseph would have most likely began to prepare a place for them inside his father's house. And, over that period of time, they would have learned to love one another. It was a special season for them.

Sometime during this period, it says Mary was "found to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit." How did Joseph find out Mary was pregnant? Did Mary tell him at some point? Did Joseph start to notice Mary's belly growing? I'm not sure. And Joseph sure wasn't buying her story, "So, you're telling me the Holy Spirit got you pregnant? Yeah, ok, right. I may be a carpenter, but I ain't stupid!" Sometimes we forget that the angel appeared to Joseph **after** he found out she was pregnant, not before. Joseph had no clue what was going on. At least the old priest Zechariah was told by an angel he would be the father to John the Baptist before the events happened. Even Mary had an angel visit and tell her she'd give birth to Jesus beforehand. Joseph had no preparation. Suddenly Joseph found himself dealing with the worst moment in his life. The news was not only heartbreaking but extremely disgraceful.

In our culture today adultery happens all the time. We've kind of gotten used to it. Yes, it's difficult and tragic, but people deal with it and move on. But, in that time, adultery was a serious matter. For a Jewish family it was breaking one of the Ten Commandments, "**You shall not commit adultery**" (Ex. 20:14). And according to the law of Moses, you could be stoned to death for committing adultery, although the Romans wouldn't allow it. When you add to that the shame and social stigma they would face in a small farming town, Joseph was between a rock and a hard place. What would he do? The text tells us Joseph was faithful to the law. He was a righteous man and could not with a clear conscience marry Mary who he thought was unfaithful. In his mind, Mary was making up a ridiculous religious story to cover her sin. But, because Joseph loved her, he didn't want to expose her to the public disgrace of divorce. So he chose a quieter way which was permitted by the law. He would get two people to witness the divorce in the privacy of their own home. A quiet divorce would keep both his righteousness and compassion intact.

Sometimes though, our good plans are not God's. Look at what happens next in verses 20–23,

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 conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

God’s Plan to Stop Joseph’s Plan

Joseph was convinced in his own mind that this was a good and honorable idea. The problem was, God had an even better plan. Emotionally exhausted Joseph goes to bed one night and an angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream and says, “Joseph son of David...” The angel first reminds Joseph of his spiritual lineage and alerts him to the role he will play in the Messiah coming through the line of King David. All the prophecies about the Messiah coming through the Davidic line are finally going to happen through Joseph. But Joseph was afraid. And since Joseph was asleep, I don’t think he was afraid of the angel’s appearance or power, like others in the Bible who encountered an angel. Joseph was afraid to take Mary as his wife. He was afraid of people and their opinions. He was afraid of the shame and disgrace they would have to endure when the word got out. In a small town like Nazareth, you better bet gossip would soon be flying around about Mary and her condition. Joseph’s dream for his marriage, starting a family, and beginning a lucrative carpentry business were over in his mind. Joseph was operating in fear. The fear of man. “What will people say if I stay with Mary? How will I ever get work when people don’t trust me?”

In our disgrace, shame, heartbreak and fear, Joseph’s story tells us God is right there. He’s never left Joseph but has a purpose and a plan for his life, one Joseph could never write on his own. So the angel confirms Mary’s story. What’s conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit and she will give birth to a son and you will name him Jesus. Joseph was told not only the name of their son but the reason for the name. “Jesus” (*Iesous*) is the Greek form of “Joshua,” which means “Yahweh is salvation” or “Yahweh saves.” The angel explains the significance of the name by quoting from Psalm 130:8, “*He [Yahweh] himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.*” The Jewish people expected a Messiah who would “redeem” and release Israel from Roman oppression. But they didn’t expect this to happen through the death of the Messiah on a cross. Jesus would redeem his people, that is, anyone who would place their faith in Jesus as Immanuel—God with us. Matthew, quoting from another ancient prophecy, Isaiah 7:14 reminds Joseph of the incredible plan of God coming to fruition in his lifetime. “*Your son Joseph will be God with us.*”

When Joseph wakes up, he’ll have a choice to make. Either continue to operate in fear or obey God, even when he doesn’t understand. Look at what happens next in verses 24–25,

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

Joseph Quietly Obeys the Lord

This is absolutely incredible to me. Joseph woke up and immediately obeyed the Lord. He took Mary home as his wife and because he was a righteous man, he didn’t sleep with her until after the birth of their son. And, after eight days, the boy would be circumcised and at that time Joseph gave him the name Jesus.

The forgotten man of Christmas can teach us a lot about the importance and power of obedience. Being a follower of Jesus means that you are no longer in control of your life. It means Jesus is not only your Savior but your Lord. He is master and king. And what he wants more than anything is for us to follow and obey him. But, obeying God is not always easy to do. Especially in a situation like Joseph. Even though you will never be in a similar situation, we can learn lots from this simple man. I’ve outlined four principles, four lessons about obedience that can help us prepare for Christmas.

The first lesson we learn has to do with immediate obedience. Joseph obeys God immediately. If you are a parent, you know the importance of immediate obedience. You want your kids to obey you the first time. Parents hate counting to three and yelling at their kids. We want our kids to obey. Immediate obedience is what we see in Joseph. He trusted his heavenly Father without question. And that’s pretty amazing especially when we compare Joseph to the others in the Christmas story. In Luke 1:18 when the announcement came to Zacharias, the soon-to-be father of John the Baptist, he immediately questioned the angel, “How will I know this will happen? I’m old and so is my wife.” Remember what happened to him? He was struck silent because he doubted God. What about Mary, the mother of Jesus?

In Luke 1:34 she also struggled with doubt. Mary said to the angel, “How can this be when I know not a man?” But not Joseph. He obeyed the Lord immediately. He woke up the next day and did exactly what the angel told him to do. When God tells you to do something, he is not interested in your excuses. He doesn’t necessarily care about the current condition of your faith. He wants to be obeyed. And God has given us the Bible, his Word, his love letter, to show us exactly how to live. The Bible says that obedience is better than sacrifice.

The forgotten man of Christmas also teaches us a great lesson about obedience in pain. Joseph shows us we can obey God even in painful circumstances. Joseph was betrothed to Mary. They

were preparing to build a life together. In the eyes of the law, they were already married. And sometime before their wedding day, Joseph finds out the unimaginable. Mary is pregnant and the baby is not his. Instantly his world comes crashing down. All his dreams for their life together crumble in an instant. He's angry. He's numb. The pain of that disappointment was almost unbearable. To make matters worse, her story was ridiculous. But Joseph shows us that we can obey God even in the midst of painful and difficult circumstances.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. knew exactly what it meant to obey in pain. He said, "I still believe that standing up for the truth of God is the greatest thing in the world. This is the end of life. The end of life is not to be happy. The end of life is not to achieve pleasure and avoid pain. The end of life is to do the will of God, come what may." There is not a person here that will get off this planet without pain and suffering. If the foundation of your life is built on your own happiness, your vocation, your relationships, or your money, then suffering will quickly sap your joy. But, like Joseph, if your ultimate value in life is God, then pain will draw you in more closely to him.

The forgotten man of Christmas also teaches us about obedience in the face of fear. Joseph needed to hear those words from the angel, "Do not be afraid." The message wasn't "Don't be too proud to obey God or do not be too disgusted or do not be too angry, or do not be too hurt or too ashamed." The word he needed to hear was, "Stop being afraid of obeying me." Joseph, like many of us, didn't even have a category for the virginal conception of Mary. It seemed ridiculous. But the Christmas story reveals how God came close and invaded our world with his supernatural power. For people like Joseph, that creates fear. Joseph just wanted to go back to his carpenter shop and play with his tools rather than have to be the stepfather of the Son of God. I can appreciate that. I mean, how do you ever discipline the Son of God? Whenever God commands us to obey him, to do anything, it's easier for us to go back to our comfortable, safe, cozy, predictable lives than it is to obey God in a radical new way.

I have three kids and I can tell you stories about all three of them where I had to yell, "Stop" or "Freeze" or "Don't touch," and it scared them so much they immediately started to cry. But, in every case, if they didn't obey my voice, they would have gotten seriously injured or worse, died. For one it was almost running out into oncoming traffic. For another it was almost falling off a trail. For one it was almost burning themselves on the stove. In each case, I am grateful that my kids obeyed me even though they were afraid. They obeyed in the face of fear. That's how it is with God. As followers of Jesus, when we hear his voice, we need to obey him even in the face of fear, even when there are consequences and we don't understand. How might God be asking you to "stop," "freeze" or "don't touch"?

The forgotten man of Christmas reminds us to obey God immediately, that obedience is possible in pain and in the face of fear. But, more than anything, this Christmas selfie, the story of Joseph, teaches us that obeying God is costly. If you are going to obey God, then there will be consequences. There will be a price to pay. For Joseph, he had the immediate consequence of taking Mary home to be his wife, but had no sexual relations with her. No doubt, they would be the talk of the town and would have to endure that shame and disgrace. Not long after Joseph married Mary, they had to drop everything and go to Bethlehem for the census. This happened to fulfill another prophecy about the birthplace of the Savior. Then, they had to go to Egypt and then back to Nazareth. And you thought your first year of marriage was hard! Obeying God is costly.

If you are serious about following Jesus, this will happen to you. Maybe you have recently started coming to church and you love how you feel afterwards and what God is starting to do in your life. But, now your company wants you to work longer hours and some weekends. You're not sure if you can stay connected here. Obeying God is costly. Maybe you have recently made a big decision in your life, one that you prayed about and felt God was wanting you to do. But, after the decision was made, suddenly everything turned against you. Obeying God is costly. Maybe, like Joseph, you've just been thrown a huge curveball from the Lord. And now he's asking you to do something that is difficult and maybe even painful. Obeying God is costly.

A few months ago my family and I felt an overwhelming sense from God to move from Millbrae, a city we love, to San Francisco, another city we love. We prayed about it; got wise counsel, and at the end of the day felt God calling us to move to San Francisco. But, I dealt with some fear. I struggled to trust God and obey him. It was much easier and more comfortable to stay in Millbrae. We love our new city and our new home, but it's been hard. I now have a commute. My kids are still in school in Millbrae for now. We don't really know anyone in our neighborhood. And my youngest son is having a really hard time with all the changes and has been acting out. But, we know God has called us there for now. Obeying God is costly.

There's a painting in the Louvre by Georges de La Tour called Joseph the Carpenter. While in college I got to visit the Louvre and wish I spent more time looking at this painting. de La Tour, among other things, is famous for his ability to paint light. The painting is of Joseph in his carpenter's shop and close to him is Jesus, maybe ten years old. He's watching his dad. Look at how he's holding the candle and you can see how almost translucent his hands look. They are working on some material on the floor and he seems to be hurrying to meet a deadline. If you look closer, what you see on the floor is really two pieces of wood in the shape of a cross. Incredibly, Joseph and Jesus are putting together a cross.

Christmas is ultimately a story about obedience. Jesus, the Son of God, left heaven's throne and entered our world to rescue us from sin, Satan and death. And our Lord, who saw simple obedience in Joseph, his dad, became obedient himself, even to the cross. Obeying God is costly.

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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