



We don't usually think too much about Joseph in the nativity story. Here's a great example of how insignificant Joseph is: When you're putting out your nativity scene, how do you know which guy is Joseph? He's the leftover guy. Nothing exciting or interesting here. Just Joseph.

This morning we're going to read the scriptures that describe Joseph's behavior surrounding Jesus' birth. As the drama we just saw portrayed, the distinguishing quality of Joseph was obedience. He always obeyed what the angel told him to do. But it couldn't have been robotic obedience. He was a complex person like each of us. Instead of robotic obedience, I see Joseph's human obedience. Today I'm going to show you three versions of it:

- Compassionate Obedience
- Courageous Obedience
- Painful Obedience

Compassionate Obedience

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 1:18-25).

We don't need to spend too much time describing this because the drama portrayed this so well. The only item I'd like to point out is the tension Joseph felt between balancing his obedience to the law with his compassion for Mary.

Because Mary became pregnant during their betrothal, the Old Testament Law required Joseph to divorce her so he wouldn't be implicated in her sin of adultery. He could do that in one of two ways: The normal way would be to make the reason for the divorce common knowledge and 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 the tension he felt when the text 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." As a man obedient to the law he couldn't marry her. But, as a compassionate man he couldn't bring himself to do it in a way that would forever disgrace her. Joseph was upright

without being uptight. He didn't have that kind of cold robotic legalism which says, "I'm going to obey the letter of the law and hurt her in the process."

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").

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 (verses 20–25).

Now we see a second expression Joseph's: Compassionate Obedience. After the angel delivered instructions, Joseph *"did what the angel commanded him"* (v. 24). There's the obedience.

As a faithful Jewish man, I wonder if the Old Testament scriptures he'd memorized on obedience were coming to his mind. *"Walk in obedience to all that the Lord your God has commanded you, so that you may live and prosper and prolong your days in the land that you will possess"* (Deut. 5:33).

Joseph knew that obedience to God involved his "yes" to whatever God instructed with the promise of God's blessing connected to it. And he's still showing an attitude of compassion paired with his obedience. Joseph is considerate to Mary. He's tender with her. There's no indication here or anywhere in his story of grudgingly obeying the angel by marrying Mary and then complaining about her swollen ankles, her hormone shifts, or her morning sickness.

It's my pure speculation but I wonder if he didn't consummate his marriage because he was showing her gentle compassion. It was a lot for Mary to take in the reality of carrying the Son of God in her womb. There's something holy and sacred about that. Joseph put his own justified sexual desires as secondary to giving his wife the space to spiritually and mentally prepare herself for her ordeal.

So this is the first version of Obedience: Compassionate Obedience. Now let's fast forward in the story: Jesus was born. Joseph, Mary and Jesus got a place to stay in Bethlehem and Mary made it feel like home. Joseph got work as a carpenter. Mary spent her time caring for Jesus, running the household and sharing life with her relatives. Everything is turning out to be pretty normal. But then, when Jesus was about 1, three Magi visited him. And what happens next shows Joseph's Courageous Obedience.

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."

So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod (verses 13–15a).

In this situation, some of you moms might say that Joseph has stopped being compassionate. He's traded his tenderness for intensity and determination. Imagine, you're wakened in the middle of the night by the urgent nudging of your husband. As you groggily orient yourself, your husband says, "Get up, get dressed and get Jesus. We're leaving immediately!"

This isn't an empathetic conversation over coffee with questions of, "Honey, how would you feel about relocating to Egypt? I heard a threat is coming against our son." This is a clear directive to act—now! In Joseph's behavior we see our second form of Obedience:

Courageous Obedience

Consider the courage it took for Joseph to do what the angel instructed. Joseph risked the aggravation of Mary by waking her in the middle of the night. He further risked Mary's aggravation by informing her that they were leaving on a long road trip to Egypt, immediately. There's nothing packed and prepared for this trip and who's going to bear the brunt of this haphazard departure? Mary. These examples seem trivial in the grandeur of the whole story. But some of you are hesitating to act obediently because you're afraid of disrupting a relationship.

However, more significant than the relational disruption were the implications of leaving their homeland. Joseph took his family to a foreign country, where he knew no one. The trip from Bethlehem to Egypt was a long trip. It would have been about 75 miles from Bethlehem to the border of Egypt. According to Philo the historian, the distance from the border of Egypt to the Jewish settlement within the country was about 100 miles. This means that their trip would have taken several weeks to complete, and it would have been a hard journey. Going to Egypt meant leaving everything: The extended family support they had in Bethlehem; his paycheck, job and the business flow he'd established. He left his dreams of building his business and building a home and

giving stability to his growing family. He left the "normal" life he'd been building.

When Joseph left for Egypt he was saying "no" to all of his desires and "yes" to God's plan. This took selfless courage. How many of us would have been so eager to do God's will that we would have gotten up in the middle of the night and left for Egypt?

A worship song by Rend Collective expresses the courage of obedience well in their song *The Cost*:

I'm saying yes to You - And no to my desires

I'll leave myself behind - And follow You

I do not need safety - As much as I need You

You're dangerous - But Lord, You're beautiful

I've counted up the cost

Oh, I've counted up the cost

Yes, I've counted up the cost

And You are worth it

Courageous Obedience scares everyone because it threatens something we hold dear. It's because of this that God doesn't just instruct us to obey robotically. He always offers us something exceedingly better to hold dear: Him and His promises.

Again, I wonder if Old Testament scriptures he'd memorized as a kid came to mind. **"Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go"** (Joshua 1:7). We're afraid because we're human. Filled with the truths of scripture, we can replace those fears with Courageous Obedience. This is the second version of obedience we see in Joseph.

Now let's fast forward through the story again. Joseph, Mary and Jesus have been living in Egypt for about two years, most likely in a Jewish community. They got a place to stay and Mary's made it feel like a home. Joseph got work as a carpenter. Mary spent her time caring for Jesus, running the household and sharing life with the women. Jesus was a toddler so he spent his days playing in the dirt with the other kids. Everything is turning out to be as normal as possible, considering they were living in a foreign land. Then Joseph had another angelic visit and we see the third version of Joseph's obedience: Painful Obedience.

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 (verses 19–23).

Painful Obedience

One example of this is the disruption caused by moving so often. Joseph and Mary were originally from Nazareth. The census got them to Bethlehem and for some untold reason they settled there for one year until the angel's visit sent them to Egypt for two years. Now they are moving again but not to Bethlehem where they'd made connections during Jesus' first year of life. No. They're going back to their hometown. Their parents and close relatives lived there. But there's no house. There's no job. For anyone who's experienced the disruption of moving, this is painful.

A second example of the painfulness of obedience is the relational cost. Like I said, Joseph and Mary were originally from Nazareth. That's the town where people knew them the best. Those are the people who whispered and gossiped about Mary's "out of marriage" pregnancy. By returning to Nazareth, they were escaping the physical dangers of Archelaus but stepping into the gossip storm. Everyone believed Mary had committed adultery or slept with Joseph. No one believed an angel had been part of it! It's painful to feel judged by others. It's painful when you know that others are convinced of something about you that you know is wrong.

A third example of the painfulness of obedience here involves Joseph's occupation. Nazareth is yet another town where he has to start all over again and establish himself. He's from there but he's been gone for at least three years. People looking for a carpenter would have asked: Is he a good carpenter? Is he honest? We've heard the stories about Mary's pregnancy. Does he have the organization skills to complete a project on time? Where's his shop anyway?

This is a painful and trying experience for any man. Building trust and your reputation takes time. And it will take Joseph even longer because of the cloud of gossip and scandal that hangs over his family.

Moving back to Nazareth represents Painful Obedience. Yet, I wonder if scripture like Deuteronomy 6:24 would have been on Joseph's mind? *"The Lord commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear the Lord our God, so that we might always prosper and be kept alive, as is the case today"* (Deut. 6:24).

Pain and disruption will fill our days as we walk in obedience to the Lord. It's a guarantee! But that doesn't have to nor should it fill our hearts. Instead, God's promises and his presence should fill our hearts. When this verse says that we'll prosper, that means that He is always working on our behalf to display His power and love through our lives. So we can always move forward in confidence, although the obedience will be painful at

times. This is the third version of Obedience we see in Joseph's life: Painful obedience.

So there you have it, three versions of Obedience from Joseph's life.

At Christmas time, we celebrate Jesus entering our world, clothed in flesh. He is Immanuel "God with us." Galatians 4:4–5 tells us why Jesus came. *"But when the set time had fully come, God sent his son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship."*

"God sent his son ..." and Jesus was obedient. He said "yes" to God the Father. But Jesus wasn't robotically obedient either. Jesus felt Compassionate Obedience because his heart was filled with love for each of us. Jesus demonstrated Courageous Obedience by entering a world that was hostile toward him. Jesus experienced Painful Obedience every moment he was separated from the glory of heaven.

Whether you're Joseph, Jesus, or us, this is what obedience will involve. As we live our lives, it's important for us to anticipate that compassion, courage and pain will be accompany our obedience too. Jesus is calling each of us to be obedient today. What is he calling you to do? Jesus said, *"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me"* (John 10:27).

Allow me to encourage and exhort you today: Listen to the voice of God and do what he says. For some of you, you know exactly what God wants you to do because you've been wrestling with Him for a while. Today is a great day to stop resisting Him and obey. Confess your rebellion. Act in Obedience.

The response of obedience doesn't come naturally to us. We resist and wrestle because we have our ideas and we think they're pretty good! We have our dreams and we love our dreams. We have something we hold dear to our hearts and we clinch it with a tight fist. Deeper levels of obedience are learned over time as we learn about God and trust Him.

We have a second family dog, Kai. He's a 6-month-old Labra Doodle. He has a playful personality. I forgot how much work is involved in training a puppy! He's gentle, fun and loving, but he's endlessly curious and disobedient! For example, he'll pick a piece of paper out of the trash. We'll scold and redirect him. Immediately he'll go back to the trash and pick out another piece of paper. He's not obedient ... yet.

I was watching a dog training video and the trainer was emphasizing the 30-minute down stay. In this position, your dog will lay down, in the midst of activity, for 30 minutes straight. The trainer said this is a foundational behavior between dog and master. Because when your dog can do this, your dog accepts that it can receive 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, I know

the best way to make myself happy. I'm going to chase that ball, squirrel, etc.

Dogs are created to fit into a social environment of authority. They are the most happy and content under the authority of a good master. When the trainer said this, I paused the video, sat on my couch and thought, "That is just like me and God. I am better off when I've learned to obey God in a 30-minute down stay."

So how do we put Jesus at the center of our Christmas? Like I said a moment ago, for some of you there's a step of obedience you've been avoiding. Just take it. You'll be ok. For all of us, we can take this Christmas season to prepare ourselves to go to deeper levels of obedience by learning to sit at Jesus' feet for a

30 minute down stay. This will involve a choice to give time to God and stop the busyness over the next four days.

- Listen to a Christmas song, then reflect and pray about the lyrics.
- Read an Advent devotional. I'm using one on my Bible app.
- Get up before anyone else in your house, get your Bible out, make a cup of coffee (if you're a night owl, do it at night; just drink decaf), turn on the Christmas tree lights and spend some time with God.

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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Catalog No. 1419-3S