

# JOSEPH, OBEDIENT TO THE LORD

by Doug Goins

---

Most of us must admit, if we're honest, that we don't do very well with unexpected change in our lives. Most of us are creatures of habit who like predictability. Even if we say that we're not traditionalists, most of us have our own traditional ways that life has to work for us.

That's especially true when it comes to Christmas traditions. All of us have our expectations of how things ought to go. We want to go home for Christmas, to be with our families. We all have inviolate patterns for tree-trimming, gift-giving, house-decorating, cookie-baking, and story-telling. So when you get married, there can be a huge Christmas culture clash between you and your partner (at least that's what Candy and I crashed into twenty years ago). You have to spend the first few years figuring out how to blend together all your conflicting expectations about how things have to be done at Christmas.

I remember another crisis that Candy and I faced when our children got old enough to voice their own opinions about Christmas. We were used to going home to our folks, either Candy's in Fresno, California or mine in Arizona. Then they started saying, "We want to stay at our home and have our own traditions." I remember feeling a bit resentful: "You mean I've got to be the dad? I can't go home to Mom and Dad?" So we had to adjust to that change in life.

We just had a new crisis this year. Our kids are eighteen, sixteen, and fourteen. For the first time in about ten years, Candy and I decided to put our Christmas tree in the den instead of the living room. Our kids just went ballistic on us: "You can't do that!" On top of that, our oldest daughter Kathryn is away at college, and it's the first time in eighteen years that she hasn't been part of trimming the Christmas tree. So we called her in the middle of decorating the tree last week and told her what we were doing, and she immediately started barking orders over the phone: "Make sure you put the glass balls on first, then put the rest of the ornaments on," and so on. Well, we laughed. But we all have our expectations about how things have to work this time of the year.

Most of us view life the same way we view Christmas. We have expectations, hopes, and dreams for the future. We do everything we can to minimize catastrophic change. We don't want life to get out of control. It has to unfold for us in fairly predictable, manageable, traditional ways.

Now, this isn't all bad. God has built order into the world, and he is not the author of chaos. But he does reserve the right to incorporate his own plans into our lives. They are designed for ultimate good. We can't predict them, but the Scriptures say that before the foundations of the world God planned the course of our life (Psalm 139:11; Ephesians 1:4; 2:10). We have no control over the way he wants to employ us in his plan of salvation for the world.

Isaiah prophesies of God's divine intervention in the life of a young Israelite virgin, of a child who was to be born to the throne of David, who was to grow up and become the eternal King (Isaiah 7:14; 9:1-7). In the last message (Discovery Paper CH-97-1), Kathy Means drew us into the heart of Mary and her struggle to submit to God's plan for her life. Mary responded to God's call with faith and courage. She came to understand her place in God's plan of salvation for the world. Mary's acceptance of this virgin birth did in fact change her life forever. But without holding anything back, she said in Luke 1:38, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said."

Now we're going to examine the response of Joseph, Mary's betrothed husband, to the Lord's colossal change of plans for his life. Joseph is a carpenter in Nazareth, where he and Mary grew up. What kind of man is this Joseph? How will he respond to the difficult situations that God is going to ask him to step into, which are completely out of his control?

In Matthew 1 and 2 we're going to survey four different encounters Joseph has with the Lord. God speaks

to him in each case through an angel. There is a pattern in these interactions that Matthew outlines for us, because Matthew wants us to see what kind of a man Joseph is. The angel is going to appear in each case and give Joseph specific direction in strong imperatives. He will give Joseph the rationale behind what he is being asked to do the first three times. And each time Joseph will respond in obedience. We're going to see a wonderfully encouraging summary of an obedient man whose lifestyle is one of conformity to the word of God.

## A GODLY MAN IN A DILEMMA

Let's look at the first example of Joseph's obedience. Matthew 1:18-20b:

**This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.**

**But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David..."**

Try to put yourself in Joseph's place. If you're a man, imagine your beloved fiancée's becoming pregnant with another man's child during your engagement period. Or if you're a woman, imagine your fiancée's impregnating another woman during your engagement. Joseph has to work through the shock, the sense of betrayal, the humiliation. Remember, Nazareth is a very small town. These are kids who have grown up together, whose families have known each other for years. In all probability their families have arranged the marriage.

Betrothal was a lot more formal than our engagement period is today. It was really a kind of pre-marriage relationship. There was a ceremony that the rabbi would perform for the betrothal. But sexual abstinence was to be maintained until after the official marriage ceremony. The betrothal lasted about a year. During that period, sexual activity was viewed as adultery. And under the strictest interpretation of the Old Testament law, it was punishable by death for both parties, although at this point in Jewish history that was not normally enforced.

In these opening verses, before Joseph makes any final decision about this crisis of relationship, and even before the angel of the Lord appears and gives him specific direction, we see that Joseph is a spiritually sensitive man. Matthew tells us Joseph is a righteous man, a man of justice who is committed to doing the right thing in every circumstance. But he is also a man of mercy who doesn't want Mary to suffer humiliation, public disgrace, and shame. The angel addresses him as a son of David. That suggests that he is of royal descent of the house of David. But it also reminds him that he is a godly man. He is a man of Torah and of temple ordinances. We also know this from the way he lives his life later, going to synagogue and to the temple when that's called for in the Scriptures. The only other person in the New Testament who is called a son of David is the Lord Jesus himself. And yet that's how the angel addresses Joseph.

Verse 20 (in the New International Version) begins, "But after he had considered this..." Literally in the Greek it says, "As he was considering this..." He is in the process of deciding what to do, and it suggests that Joseph hasn't finally resolved the dilemma before God speaks into his struggle. Joseph, to his credit, certainly is not rushing to judgment. But it seems, from the text, that he is leaning toward asking the rabbi to grant a divorce, and then helping Mary's family send her away from Nazareth to finish out the pregnancy, wanting to protect her from the cruelty of small-town gossip.

## OBEDIENCE IN THE FACE OF LOSS

But look at God's change of plans for Joseph. Verses 20b-25:

**...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 be with child and will 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 had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.**

The Lord gives two commands to Joseph in verses 20-21: "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife," and, "She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus." Now stop and think a minute: What could Joseph be fearful of? In each case it's a fear of loss. If he marries her, it's going to be assumed in Nazareth that he is the father of the baby she has been carrying for three months. His reputation as a man of impeccable character will be undermined. He also assumes he won't begin married life with a wife whose virginity has been saved for him alone, or know the pleasure of beginning sexual intimacy together in innocence. There is that loss. And finally, perhaps the most important thing Joseph fears losing in following God's plan and purpose is the greatest privilege of any Jewish father--physically procreating his own first-born son. Luke 1 tells of the joy of Zechariah and Elizabeth after a whole lifetime of childlessness, when God blessed them with a baby boy. But Joseph is called to give up his legitimate rights, to violate common sense, to step forward into circumstances that seem unreal.

The angel offers him two reasons for these commands. First, the child in Mary is conceived through the Holy Spirit. And second, the reason the child is to be named Jesus is that he will save his people from their sins. God is telling Joseph, "The great news is that Mary has not been unfaithful to you--God has been at work through the Holy Spirit to miraculously bring about this conception. Joseph, you will be the legal father of the boy, but not the physical father. And you are to name this baby boy Jesus. [This is the Old-Testament name Joshua or Y'shua. It means, "Yahweh is Salvation," or, "God saves."] He will fulfill Old-Testament promises. 'He [Yahweh] himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.' [Psalm 130:8.] Jesus will rescue God's people from guilt, from the power of sin, from condemnation."

In verses 22-23 Matthew parenthetically drops into the narrative the prophetic promises I mentioned earlier from Isaiah 7 and 9. The supernatural conception of Jesus in the womb of the virgin Mary is the fulfillment of God's saving commitment to his people. As Immanuel, Jesus is the very presence of God with us. He comes to live with us and in us, the New Testament tells us. Joseph is being asked to commit to something that's hard to fathom intellectually. He is being asked to enter into cosmic plans that God has for the world, for the salvation of humankind. He's being asked to tenderly, lovingly take this young girl into his home as his wife, and also to offer a loving father's provision and protection to this little one who will be born to save his people from their sins.

Joseph is not an Old-Testament scholar. He is a simple carpenter. But he is a man who obeys God when he understands what he is being asked to do. And that's what verses 24-25 tell us. When he wakes up, he obeys the command. The language used implies urgency. There is no argument, no rationalization, no hesitation; but with kindness and compassion he immediately takes Mary to be his wife. He then lovingly cares for her through the final months of pregnancy, protecting her from the rumors about a "shotgun wedding." The text also says that even though Joseph is Mary's husband, he doesn't ask her for sexual intimacy. They wait until after Jesus' birth to enjoy love-making. And again what we see in Joseph is an amazing model of obedience to the Lord and of godly self-denial in maintaining sexual purity.

Luke's gospel tells us that both Mary and Joseph are descendants of King David. That's why both go to Bethlehem for the registration, although according to law Joseph as the husband probably could go and register for both of them. But they go together because Mary is in her final weeks, even days, of pregnancy. Perhaps Joseph doesn't want to leave her alone in Nazareth, subject to gossip, but wants her with him so he can protect her. After the baby's birth in Bethlehem, the Scriptures tell us that Joseph gives his son the name that God has chosen, Jesus. Again, he is probably giving up something he looked forward to: choosing a name for his first-born, perhaps the family name. But he submits his own desires to what God wants. Yet Joseph is not some sort of spiritual giant. He's a man like us, who was asked to trust God in really difficult, confusing circumstances.

Three or four years ago I read about the president of Columbia Bible College and Columbia Seminary in South Carolina, Dr. Robertson McQuillican. For a number of years he was well-known as a Bible teacher,

Bible scholar, and author, and had this very privileged position as president of the seminary, training young men and women for ministry. When he was in his early sixties, his wife developed Alzheimer's. He could have put her into some kind of care facility, but he chose to resign his position and devote his entire life to caring for her. When questioned about why he would need to do that, he answered simply, "That's what God wants me to do." Joseph was willing to sacrifice his own hopes, dreams, and plans for his life, to be obedient to the Lord. Dr. McQuillican did it. And God is going to call us to the same sort of obedience in all different kinds of settings.

## OBEDIENCE WITH AN UNCERTAIN OUTCOME

The second encouraging view of Joseph's obedience comes about two years after the birth of Jesus. Joseph and Mary don't return to their hometown, but instead they have settled into a house in Bethlehem. Joseph is probably supporting his family as a carpenter. Bethlehem in one sense represents a fresh start for this young couple, because they don't have the burden of having to make all the explanations that would be required if they went back to Nazareth.

Matthew 2 begins with the beautifully mysterious story of the visit of the Magi. God warns the Magi in a dream not to go back to Herod because of his jealous rage and murderous plans. Verses 12b-15:

**...They returned to their country by another route.**

**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. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."**

The command comes to get up in the middle of that very night. Probably the soldiers are already on their way down from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, and are just a few miles away. Joseph and Mary have to pack up very hurriedly and head south from Bethlehem, through Hebron, down across the desert. The logical route to take to Egypt, in terms of safety and well-traveled roads with troops along the way for protection, would be to go north to Jerusalem, west to the Mediterranean coast, and then down the coast into Egypt. But the troops themselves are the danger. So God sends them on a very dangerous, little-traveled route. Joseph is not a seasoned world traveler. He's from Galilee, a backwater. He's a country boy. Probably Bethlehem is the farthest he has ever been from home, and now God is immediately asking him to relocate to a foreign country. His business is established in Bethlehem, but now he is to take his family to Egypt on faith. You wonder why they couldn't just slip out of Bethlehem and hide somewhere until Herod's frenzy is over, then come back to town. But God says they must go to Egypt.

There is a second command in verse 13: "Stay there until I tell you." God leaves it totally open-ended. This is difficult! They are to relocate to a foreign country, and God doesn't even tell them how long they're going to stay there. Do you ever struggle when God asks you to do something hard and doesn't tell you how it's going to turn out?

Verse 14 says that Joseph immediately gets up in the middle of that very night and obeys God's command without argument. He protects his family from Herod's murderous intent, and he does it God's way.

The Old-Testament quotation at the end of verse 15 tells us again that God has bigger things going on than Joseph can even imagine. The fulfillment of Old-Testament promise is at stake here. Joseph is being asked to walk into a circumstance much bigger than his own perspective, again, because God's purposes always have cosmic proportions. We just think it's about us and what we're called to do or be or give up. But it's always about bigger things. We've got to learn to see the unseen things going on around us.

About ten years ago, Ed Woodhall and I decided that we needed to make a trip to Bogotá, Colombia. We had been down there a number of times with a prison ministry that was sponsored by PBC. But we made the difficult decision to terminate the relationship over some theological issues. We knew we had to tell our

friends in person. We didn't really have the time to go, but we felt compelled by the Lord to do it. We owed it to them. It was also a time when the criminal element in Colombia was kidnapping American businessmen from off the streets in the big cities, Cali and Bogotá, and Medellín. So we knew we would be going into that danger. Our wives weren't thrilled about the prospect. And I remember both of us agonizing, going to the elders and saying, "Brothers, what do you think?"

But we did go, out of obedience. And it was hard to tell these dear friends that we were breaking ties with them. But one person who was involved in those discussions throughout the five days we were there was a brother named Jaime Guerrero, who had been working in the prison ministry in Colombia. Little did we know then that within two or three years, the Lord would lead him back into Mexico, his country of origin, and he would begin a fledgling prison ministry in Mexico City. About eight years ago we were asked to come down and work with Jaime. The Lord has opened a huge door, and many from PBC have now been down to work in this prison ministry in Mexico. God had something much bigger going on--but we had to be willing to walk into that situation in Bogotá without knowing what the results would be. That's what Joseph demonstrates for us: obedience in spite of a very difficult journey and an indeterminate, open-ended future.

## OBEDIENCE THAT LEAVES COMFORT BEHIND

Verse 16 describes the horror of Herod's slaughter of all the baby boys in the area around Bethlehem. In verse 19 the death of Herod brings us to the third encouraging look at Joseph's obedience. Here it is an obedience exercised with the hope of finally getting their lives settled back into a normal pattern. Verses 19-21:

**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.**

Now, we don't know exactly how long Joseph and his family stayed in Egypt--probably about two years, based on when Herod died. We know there was a very large Jewish population in Egypt, and again, Joseph's carpentry skills would have supported them comfortably. Egypt was a much more hospitable land than Israel in terms of climate, natural resources, and economic prosperity. So in light of Mary and Joseph's strained relationships in Nazareth and the shortness of their stay in Bethlehem, we shouldn't assume that this command to return to Israel is necessarily easy for this family, especially with a growing four-year-old. But Joseph gets up and obeys the command. Immediately he leads his family back into their home country, presumably toward the normalcy of their home in Bethlehem where Jesus spent his first two years, and where Joseph most recently pursued his vocation as a carpenter.

## OBEDIENCE WITH SOCIAL STIGMA

But God intervenes and redirects his plans. The last two verses of this chapter reveal Joseph's obedience in spite of being asked to return to a difficult setting. Verses 22-23:

**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: "He will be called a Nazarene."**

They're on their way back to Bethlehem, but when they get back into the country of Israel, this frightening news comes that Herod's son Archelaus has succeeded him on the throne. Archelaus is just as evil and bloodthirsty as his father, and the region of Judea where Bethlehem is located is under his reign. This is the second time in these accounts that we've seen Joseph afraid. The first time, back in Nazareth, he was fearful about losing his reputation, about lost hopes and dreams. But now the fear is for the safety of his dear wife and this little boy Jesus, whose welfare has been entrusted to him.

Just because we're seeking to be obedient to the Lord, trying to walk consistently after him and hear his

voice, it doesn't mean that we won't be assailed by fear. But each time this godly man struggles with fear, God speaks into the fear and reveals himself. Joseph is redirected to Nazareth of Galilee, back to the place this all began: the setting of the unwed pregnancy, the source of disgraceful rumors. John's gospel records that even after Jesus has grown to adulthood, rumors still circulate that he was born of fornication. So even after four years away from Nazareth, it's going to be difficult for Joseph and Mary to face the rumor mill.

What's interesting this time, unlike the first three times that God has spoken, is that he doesn't give Joseph a reason for this direction. But Matthew tells us that the fulfillment of Old-Testament prophecy is very important. This is the place the boy is to grow up. But Joseph, not knowing the reason why, nevertheless obeys the command. He just continues his pattern of consistent, obedient response to God's word. He takes his wife and his stepson home to Nazareth, still protective of her honor and reputation, ignoring the social stigma.

Joseph also demonstrates consistent obedience toward his family through the years that follow as Jesus is growing up, providing for them with his carpentry. And the result is that gradually Joseph comes to be viewed by the community in Nazareth as the father of Jesus Christ, because of how he treats him. In the gospels, during Jesus' public ministry, once the people in Galilee are quoted as calling Jesus the carpenter's son, and another time they call him the son of Joseph. That is because of Joseph's consistent lifestyle of faithfulness to Jesus: providing for him, protecting him, preparing him for life.

Last week I read some gentle Christmas wisdom: "You can tell a lot about a man by the way he handles three things: rainy days, lost luggage, and tangled Christmas tree lights." We can tell a lot about ourselves by the way we handle the revealed word of God, by the way we respond when God asks us to give up our hopes and dreams, when he asks us to die to ourselves or to our legitimate rights, when he sends us on dangerous and difficult journeys that have no scheduled end. A number of us in this body are on that kind of a journey, whether in physical illness, painful and difficult family circumstances, or vocational responsibility. And what can we learn from the way we respond when God asks us to leave the comfortable, exotic security of Egypt and return to normalcy? Some of us don't like routine. How do we respond when God tells us to just show up day after day? Or how about the way we respond when God asks us to return to a difficult setting where everybody knows our shortcomings and inconsistencies and perceived failures? God asks us to obediently walk by faith, not by sight.

The carpenter's son watched his legal father Joseph, and he learned obedience. The New Testament says that Jesus' obedience led him even to death on a cross. Joseph and the Lord Jesus were both called sons of King David of Israel. I'd like us to hear a challenge from the pen of that spiritual father in Psalm 103:17-18, 20:

**"But from everlasting to everlasting  
the LORD'S love is with those who fear him,  
and his righteousness with their children's children--  
with those who keep his covenant  
and remember to obey his precepts...  
Praise the LORD, you his angels,  
you mighty ones who do his bidding,  
who obey his word.  
Praise the LORD, all his heavenly hosts,  
you his servants who do his will."**

We're called to no less this Christmas season. God's love is offered to people who fear him, who obey his

word and do his will. We're children of our Lord Jesus, and he said, "If you love me, you will obey what I command" (John 14:15). It's the same call that Joseph himself heard. You know, the Scriptures record no spoken words of Joseph. Mary talked a lot through the whole nativity, singing and expressing her feelings. But it is Joseph's obedient actions that speak loudly and clearly of the kind of man he was.

Scripture quotations are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION. © 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

---

Catalog No. CH-97-2  
Matthew 1:18-2:23  
Single Message  
Doug Goins  
December 21, 1997

- [Doug Goins' Home Page](#)
- [Peninsula Bible Church Home Page](#)
- [Discovery Publishing: Books, sermons, tapes.](#)

---

[Copyright \(C\) 1995 Discovery Publishing](#), a ministry of [Peninsula Bible Church](#). This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.