

## Text: Mt 1.18-25

Last week we worked our way down Joseph's family tree to put him as far out of the spotlight as we could.

We don't know why Joseph and Mary were in Nazareth. One guess is that it was a good idea for people with a royal pedigree to be out of the way, lest the ruler's representatives got any ideas.

In any case, our text finds them in Nazareth. Joseph just discovered that his betrothed bride is pregnant and he knows he isn't responsible. That puts him in an awkward position, which is part of what we will talk about today.

Read Mt 1.18-25

### *Do Not be Afraid*

We, looking back, celebrate the virgin birth. It is a founding pillar of the doctrine of the incarnation.

What about those whom God chose to take part in it? How did it affect their world? What did it mean for them socially and religiously?

As I often like to do with narrative passages, let's try to put ourselves into the shoes of Joseph.

First, let's talk about him. We don't know much about him, almost everything people say is speculation, based on the thinnest of details in the Bible or on what little we know about 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish culture.

Often, you will hear that Mary was a teenager and Joseph was older, perhaps significantly older. (Note that the Bible doesn't tell us one way or another.)

Typical comment on this:

"If typical Jewish custom were followed, she may well have been still a young teenager. Joseph may have been considerably older."<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, the Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary says this:

"Frequently people married at a young age, a fact that made the parents' choice a practical matter. By New Testament times, the Jewish leaders had decided to establish minimum ages for which a

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<sup>1</sup> Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary 22 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 57.

marriage contract could be drawn up. The age was set at 13 for boys and 12 for girls.”<sup>2</sup>

One more observation, from the CT article I quoted last week,

“It is most likely that the real, nonapocryphal Joseph was an average Jewish young man, with some religious education. Rabbinic writings suggest that the expected age for marriage in Joseph’s time was the late teens. So Joseph was probably living with his parents or relatives when the angel told him to marry Mary. After Jesus was born, Joseph had four boys and an unknown number of girls with Mary (Matt. 13:55–56).”<sup>3</sup>

What are we to think of all this?

I find it hard to conceive of a very young Mary, say the Rabbinic minimum of 12, would be allowed to travel alone to see Elizabeth, or be able to compose the Magnificat with its depth of theological understanding.

I also find it hard to believe Joseph was significantly older than Mary. Mostly, this is speculation based on the absence of Joseph during Jesus’ ministry – most think he has died. However, there is no reason to think an early death impossible for a laboring man, as he was.

I go through all this to say that Mary and Joseph were probably a young couple, he perhaps in his twenties, she perhaps in her later teens (at the earliest).

Now, considering their relative youth, and inexperience in life, we will find them confronted with a situation they did not choose, having to make decisions they didn’t expect, and living out their lives with the consequences.

There is one key thing that makes the difference for Joseph, which I hope you will see as we go.

## I. Joseph’s character

### A. “Righteous” (19)

1. In my notes, I describe Joseph as “righteous in the OT sense”

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<sup>2</sup> “Marriage” in Ronald F. Youngblood, ed., *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary: Completely Revised and Updated Edition* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Acher Niyonizigiye, “Gentle Joseph, Meek & Mild,” *Christianity Today*, December 2021, 34.

## 2. Blomberg:

“He is called a ‘righteous’ man, which for Matthew does not imply sinless perfection but regularly refers to one who is law-abiding, upright in character, and generally obedient and faithful to God’s commandments.”<sup>4</sup>

## 3. The way Proverbs describes the “righteous man”

- a. Teachable (Pr 9.9)
- b. Conscientious, even with his animals (Pr 12.10)
- c. Hates falsehood (Pr 13.5)
- d. Walks in integrity — influences his sons (Pr 20.7)
- e. May fail, but gets up again (Pr 24.16)
- f. Stands up against the ways of the wicked (Pr 25.26)

## B. Observant (Lk 2.41)

Lk 2.41 ¶ Now His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover.

1. The Jews before the exile were mixed in their religious observance (very few Law-keepers)
2. After the return, the Jews determined not to fall into idolatry again, became very observant → extremes led to Pharisaism
3. The ordinary Israelite lived a life adhering to the traditions of the Law very carefully

I don’t want to say more about Joseph than the Bible says, but these brief descriptions point to a man in humble circumstances who honours his God and lived a life of integrity.

- The kind of man a dad would want for a son-in-law
- The kind of man who would have made for a good king himself

<sup>4</sup> Blomberg, *Matthew*, 58.

## II. Joseph's dilemma

### A. Facts about the virgin conception we must understand

1. Joseph was in the dark for a significant portion of the pregnancy
2. The angel Gabriel made his announcement to Mary alone (Lk 2)
3. The betrothal *had* to be a prior condition: the announcement to Mary came to a betrothed young woman
4. Betrothal was much more serious in 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaism than our engagement (which is serious enough)
  - a. Almost as binding as marriage itself
  - b. The terms "husband" and "wife" sometimes used of betrothed individuals in the Bible
  - c. Non-biblical writings describe significant penalties for breaking betrothals
  - d. Intimate relations not allowed for the betrothed couple (not yet married), but considered adultery if they engaged in it with others
5. We know that Mary went to stay with Elizabeth
  - a. She went immediately after the encounter with Gabriel (Lk 1.33)
  - b. She stayed with Elizabeth for three months (Lk 1.56)
6. Joseph's activity in light of coming marriage
  - a. In the customs of the day, following the betrothal, he would be preparing a home (building/furnishing house)
  - b. When he was ready, he would take Mary to that home, that is when the marriage would happen
  - c. The bride wouldn't know the exact day, but would likely have some hints (house nearing completion, for example)
  - d. At the point of this passage, it may be that he was almost ready for her
7. Except... now he finds out about the pregnancy (Mt 1.18)
  - a. They were betrothed

- b. They *had not come together* — Matthew makes this point crystal clear
- c. Mary “was found” with child
  - 1) Idiom: “she was found in the stomach having”
  - 2) The timing is sometime after her return from Elizabeth, when her pregnancy is obvious

Suddenly, the whole family is in a crisis: Joseph, his parents, her parents, the community – you can’t keep this a secret.

## B. What is Joseph to do?

- 1. The crisis puts Joseph in a turmoil
  - a. The Law condemns adultery, makes it a capital crime
    - 1) Joseph is a righteous man [high regard for the Law] (19)
    - 2) Joseph also seems to be a compassionate man – “not wanting to disgrace her” (19)
  - b. Joseph spends some time thinking about it – “considered” [inner thoughts] (20)
- 2. Understanding Joseph’s decision
  - a. The text emphasizes Joseph’s character as a Law-keeping man – “righteous”
    - 1) Unwilling to take Mary because of her supposed unfaithfulness
    - 2) Unwilling to accept the implication that he was “the guilty party” in the pregnancy
  - b. The provisions of the Law when a woman was unfaithful
    - 1) Execution by stoning to death (though rare in 1<sup>st</sup> c.)
    - 2) Public accusation and trial before the priests
    - 3) The Mishnah added an interpretation allowing a “quiet sending away”
  - c. Joseph chose option three (19)

## C. At this point, God sends his angel to Joseph

1. The angel is unnamed, but presumably Gabriel
2. The angel brings God's revelation to Joseph – revealing things he could not know

Note: the implication is that Joseph hasn't talked to Mary about this at all (and who could believe Mary's story, just on her say-so?)

### 3. The angel's message

- a. Calls to Joseph as "son of David" – Joseph has a role to play in the kingdom, despite his obscurity
- b. Contradicts Joseph's fears: "do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife"
- c. Explains Mary's innocence – "the Child ... is of the Holy Spirit"
- d. Identifies the Child:

1) Jesus (Joshua) = Yahweh is salvation

2) Purpose: "he will save his people from their sins" (ref. to Ps 130.8)

Ps 130.8 And He will redeem Israel From all his iniquities.

### e. Carson takes vv. 22-23 as also the voice of the angel

- 1) Identifying that this event is God's plan from of old
- 2) Offering proof to Joseph that a virgin conception is essential

Had Joseph ever considered Isa 7.14 in this light before?

3) Saying perhaps more than Joseph could comprehend at this point: Immanuel = God with us

So, now we have the young man, fully informed, his previous views overturned. What will he do?

### III. Joseph's act of faith

A. Joseph got up and did what the angel of the Lord commanded

“Get up, Joseph!”

B. Joseph's acts of obedience: show his faith

1. He took Mary as his wife (lit., and took the woman of his)

Remember the tradition? The young man prepares the home, gets the friends of the bridegroom together, goes to the bride, brings her to his home, and the party starts.

a. What is Mary's state of mind at this point? — she may expect trouble

b. That night, the bridegroom arrives with his friends — the wedding commences

2. He kept her a virgin until she gave birth – not an act of jealousy, but faith in the word of God

3. He named the son: Jesus (Joshua), just as the angel said

#### Conclusion:

**Proposition:** Standing up for God means acting in faith concerning what God says.

The story and will of God for Joseph is incredible (hard to believe).

Joseph, the righteous man, responded in faith.

Get up, Joseph!

What about you? What has God told you to do that, perhaps, you are wavering on?

Are you a believer in Jesus Christ? God commands all men everywhere to believe.

Are you obedient to God's will as revealed in the NT? Do you obey when it doesn't make sense, or goes against your preferences?

**Proposition:** Standing up for God means acting in faith concerning what God says.