

December 14th, 2008
“The Faith of Joseph”
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Matthew 1:18-25

18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit.

19 Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly.

20 But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.

21 And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins.”

22 So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying:

23 “Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which is translated, “God with us.”

24 Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife,

25 and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name JESUS.

Thank you very much for coming to hear the message for today. Before we begin our next lesson, let us reiterate our reason for attending Church.

We attend Church to obtain the mind of Christ, meaning, to have the Bible illuminated in our minds so that we can clearly understand the principles that Jesus taught and base our daily personal decisions on those principles.

We come to Church because we want to be obedient to the Bible, which is the doctrine of Jesus Christ, in an informed, insightful and intelligent manner.

I find Joseph to be one of the most interesting characters in the Christmas story. Both he and Mary were faced with some interesting challenges, but I see Joseph as a role model. Let us examine his story from our perspective as participants in the age of the condom and birth control pill, in which we live with the public acceptance of sexual activity between unmarried adolescents and adults as common and normal, and the glorification of divorce as a positive solution to marital problems.

The story starts in the book of Luke, with the announcement of the impending birth of John the Baptist to Zacharias and Elizabeth. Zacharias was a priest that performed the ceremonial sacrifices to God in the Temple. God commanded Moses, in Exodus chapter 30:
Exodus 30:1, 7-8:

1 “You shall make an altar to burn incense on; you shall make it of acacia wood.

7 “Aaron shall burn on it sweet incense every morning; when he tends the lamps, he shall burn incense on it.

8 And when Aaron lights the lamps at twilight, he shall burn incense on it, a perpetual incense before the LORD throughout your generations.

The ceremony of burning incense on the altar was much like our sacrament of communion. It was considered holy by the Israelites, and was the job of the priests, the descendents of Aaron to continually perform. Zacharias was such a priest, and was performing his duty as the Christmas story begins in **Luke 1:8, 9, 11-13, 17:**

8 So it was, that while [Zacharias] was serving as priest before God in the order of his division,

9 according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord.

11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to [Zacharias], standing on the right side of the altar of incense.

12 And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him.

13 But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.

17 He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, ‘to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,’ and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

This message from the angel telling Zacharias that his wife was about to become pregnant ought to have been a source of joy for him, because, as **Luke 1:7** informs us:

7 But [Zacharias and Elizabeth] had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years.

With Elizabeth being barren and both of them being old, having a baby was certainly not on the radar for either or them. But although Zacharias was a priest, his mind was bound by the mundane things of this life rather than by his faith of God.

Zacharias knew that his wife Elizabeth was unable to bear children even when she was in her childbearing age, and, in addition to that, he also knew that once women reach the age of menopause, childbearing is no longer part of their future. Nevertheless, I would have thought that Zacharias, as a priest, would have had a more positive outlook after receiving the information from an angel of God in God’s very Temple that his wife would conceive seed and that his son, John, would be a great man in the Lord. But **Luke 1:18** records:

18 And Zacharias said to the angel, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years.”

Zacharias, this is a prophecy from God given directly to you by an angel in God’s Temple. What does your age or that of your wife have to do with it? You’re a priest; you should know your Bible. You should know that Abraham and Sarah had Isaac when Sarah was 90 years of age and Abraham was 100. No, that’s not a typical situation, but Abraham and Sarah conceived seed by the power of God. Isaac’s birth was prophesied to them by angels, just as the prophecy of your son was given to you by an angel.

God has the ability to change or control nature, if it is His will. If I tell you that something outside of the normal is about to happen, it is fair for you to be skeptical, because I have no power over nature to make things outside of the normal happen and, as far as you know, my record at telling you that which God is going to do, other than that which I find in the Bible, is not that good. But, if an angel of God appears to you, give his word more credence than you might give mine. We all need to have faith in the word of God. **Hebrews 11:1-2** tells us:

1 Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

2 For by it the elders obtained a good testimony.

The writer of the Hebrews goes on to mention the faith of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and the harlot Rahab, who sheltered the Israelite spies entering the Promised Land. He then goes on to say, in **Hebrews 11:32-34**:

32 And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah, also of David and Samuel and the prophets:

33 who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions,

34 quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens.

Faith in God gave the Patriarchs the power to achieve supernatural victories over negative circumstances. The angel of God was not instructing Zacharias to do anything supernatural, but simply to go home and make love to his wife, which he was certainly planning to do anyway. When his wife became pregnant and gave birth to a male child, Zacharias was to name the child John. But Zacharias asked the angel for proof that this was going to happen. What possible proof could he need to go home and make love to his wife?

The moral of the story is that we need to think before we speak. A wise man once said, “When it is foolish to speak, the wise say nothing.” Zacharias would have been wise to either remain silent, or to simply agree with the angel, choosing his words more carefully. Men, in particular, can’t really afford to speak indiscriminately. It is important to think about the ramifications of that which you say, along with the consequences that your speech may bring you. But the angel did give Zacharias an answer. In **Luke 1:19-20**:

19 And the angel answered and said to [Zacharias], “I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings.

20 But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time.”

Since Zacharias did not use his powers of speech well, they were taken away from him by God. Fortunately, his wife Elizabeth did become pregnant and give birth to a son. When Elizabeth informed the relatives that the child was to be named John, there was a dispute among the in-laws about the name. **Luke 1:59-65**

59 So it was, on the eighth day, that they came to circumcise the child; and they would have called him by the name of his father, Zacharias.

60 His mother answered and said, “No; he shall be called John.”

61 But they said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who is called by this name.”

62 So they made signs to [Zacharias] his father—what he would have him called.

63 And [Zacharias] asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, saying, “His name is John.” So

they all marveled.

64 Immediately [Zacharias] mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, praising God.

65 Then fear came on all who dwelt around them; and all these sayings were discussed throughout all the hill country of Judea.

As I mentioned, Zacharias' participation in the Christmas story only involved two responsibilities. He had to make love to his wife, and he had to give the male child that they produced the name John. But Zacharias was not the only fellow in the story that spoke to an angel about his child. Our text begins, in **Matthew 1:18**:

18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit.

Matthew, the writer of this Gospel, wrote after the death of Jesus Christ on the Cross. He knew from his investigation of the history of Jesus Christ, that the Holy Spirit used the supernatural power of God to put the child Jesus in Mary's womb. Joseph, however, had no such knowledge, as the next verse, **Matthew 1:19**, indicates:

19 Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly.

The phrase, "put her away" means to divorce her. In the marriage rituals of the Jews, when a man wished to marry a woman, he first gave her his "troth" and received hers. The word "troth" means one's pledged word, one's faith as pledged in a solemn undertaking and especially in an agreement to marry.

Once a couple was "betrothed", meaning that they had given one another their solemn promises to marry, they assumed the same obligation to one another as did a married couple, although they could not share a home and intimate relations until the actual wedding. The reason for the betrothal period was to allow the bride time to furnish the home and the groom time to prepare financially for living as man and wife. The man had to build or buy a house for the couple to live in, and the woman had to prepare the house, as women generally do, for their married life. Jewish weddings were not solemnized by a ceremony as are ours, but by consummating the wedding, meaning the married couple would experience their first intercourse with one another in their new joint home.

God tells us, in His Law, that it is particularly important for the young woman to be a virgin on her wedding night. **Deuteronomy 22:13-17 records:**

13 "If any man takes a wife, and goes in to her, and detests her,

14 and charges her with shameful conduct, and brings a bad name on her, and says, 'I took this woman, and when I came to her I found she was not a virgin,'

15 then the father and mother of the young woman shall take and bring out the evidence of the young woman's virginity to the elders of the city at the gate.

16 And the young woman's father shall say to the elders, 'I gave my daughter to this man as wife, and he detests her.

17 Now he has charged her with shameful conduct, saying, "I found your daughter was not a virgin," and yet these are the evidences of my daughter's virginity.' And they shall spread the cloth before the elders of the city.

The expectation of the Jews was that the young woman's hymen would be ruptured

during the couple's first intercourse, causing the young woman to bleed on the sheet upon which the couple consummated their marriage. The bloody sheet would then be given to the parents of the bride as proof of the bride's virginity on her wedding night, and could be presented to the elders to refute an accusation of premarital unfaithfulness. The Scripture goes on to tell us the penalty that the man would have to pay for unjustly accusing his bride of unfaithfulness.

Deuteronomy 22:18-19 says:

18 Then the elders of that city shall take that man and punish him;

19 and they shall fine him one hundred shekels of silver and give them to the father of the young woman, because he has brought a bad name on a virgin of Israel. And she shall be his wife; he cannot divorce her all his days.

The Scripture also tells us the outcome commanded by God should the man's accusation be true, in **Deuteronomy 22:20-21**

20 "But if the thing is true, and evidences of virginity are not found for the young woman, 21 then they shall bring out the young woman to the door of her father's house, and the men of her city shall stone her to death with stones, because she has done a disgraceful thing in Israel, to play the harlot in her father's house. So you shall put away the evil from among you.

As I said, God decrees, in His Law, that it is particularly important for the young woman to be a virgin on her wedding night. Sex outside of wedlock has potentially two negative physical side effects, the first being pregnancy. But we live in a time in which, because of easy access to abortion, this side effect is largely disregarded, and young women consider virginity to be a burden. One of the goals of the feminist movement was ostensibly to keep women from becoming sex objects, but the actual effect appears to be the opposite. Unmarried sexual activity in our country was at an all time high in the 1990's, although it appears to be subsiding to some degree now.

Girls as young as fifteen are sexually active as a matter of course. I once read a news story in which a reporter interviewed a pregnant fifteen year old, and asked her why she was pregnant at this young age.

"Well", responded the girl, "Fifteen is old enough to be pregnant."

"You are?" asked the reporter? "You're not old enough to be married at fifteen, so why do you think that you are old enough to be pregnant at fifteen?"

"My mom got pregnant at fifteen", said the girl, "and so did my older sisters and my aunts. I guess fifteen is the age when girls get pregnant."

According to the National Center for Health Statistics and the Bureau of the Census, annually, an estimated 820,000 young women become pregnant outside of wedlock before the age of 20. Although while the young women in question are having out of wedlock sex, they think that pregnancy is appropriate and marriage is unnecessary. The Bible, however, tells us that the disapproval of God toward an illegitimate child is profound. **Deuteronomy 23:2** tells us: **2 "One of illegitimate birth shall not enter the assembly of the LORD; even to the tenth generation none of his descendants shall enter the assembly of the LORD.**

In case you think that this is simply an Old Testament concept, you might want to read the fifth chapter of 1 Corinthians, in which Paul says, among other things, that church members are not to associate with Christians that are sexually immoral. **Hebrews 13:4** tells us that those

that participate in sexual activity with someone with whom they are not married are in danger of being under the judgment of God, rather than the grace of Jesus Christ, as it says:

4 Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge.

Although our culture condones out of wedlock sex, and the resultant sins of illegitimate children being raised by single parents that lack the emotional, intellectual and financial maturity to raise children, as well as abortion, the church still has the mandate to educate its members as to the content of the Word of God on this matter, emphasizing that God's opinion about adultery and fornication has not changed because that of the culture has.

This information about sex out of wedlock is relevant as we consider Joseph's involvement in the Christmas story. We read, in **Matthew 1:19**, that once Joseph found out that Mary was pregnant, he wanted to "put her away", meaning to withdraw his pledge to marry her.

An angel told Mary that she was going to become pregnant by the Holy Spirit, but Mary did not tell Joseph about her condition immediately. Mary's immediate actions after her conversation with the angel are described in **Luke 1:39-45, 56**:

39 Now Mary arose in those days and went into the hill country with haste, to a city of Judah,

40 and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth.

41 And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

42 Then she spoke out with a loud voice and said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!

43 But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

44 For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy.

45 Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord."

56 And Mary remained with her about three months, and returned to her house.

So, after speaking to the angel, Mary immediately went to the home of Elizabeth, who was her relative and Zacharias' wife. As we know, Elizabeth was also miraculously pregnant, and her child was destined to become John the Baptist, the forerunner of Mary's child Jesus Christ.

Joseph found out that Mary was pregnant after she came home from this three month trip to the hill country to see Elizabeth. This was before the days of cell phones, instant messaging, text messaging, and e-mail, and it is very likely that Mary and Joseph had no communication during this three month period. From Joseph's perspective, Mary got up one morning, took off going to who knows where, and came back pregnant three months later. Joseph did not share the urgency that Mary felt to see Elizabeth, having not shared in the dream that Mary had, and, it goes without saying, that Joseph was not pleased to see Mary pregnant.

Men generally feel less affectionate toward and have less respect for women that make themselves available for casual sex than women who demand the respect of a marital commitment before they become sexually active. Participation in casual sex makes a woman less

valuable as a wife. A virgin is a prize after which to be sought while an available woman is a convenience to be used.

But Joseph had been ready to marry Mary, and he felt a certain level of affection for her. Joseph did not want to have Mary stoned, but he simply wanted to get out of the situation with as little embarrassment as possible. Joseph was considering going to Mary's parents to withdraw his troth, his promise of marriage, rather than having Mary prosecuted and stoned. God interceded.

Matthew 1:20-21 tells us:

20 But while [Joseph] thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.

21 And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins."

An angel visited Joseph with the information that Mary had not been unfaithful to him, and that the child that Mary carried was the result of God's direct intervention and in fulfillment of a seven hundred year old prophecy. Joseph was familiar with the prophecy, which was originally recorded in **Isaiah 7:14**. **Matthew 1:22-23** tells us:

22 So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying:

23 "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which is translated, "God with us."

Let's compare the experience of Joseph with that of Zacharias. The angel visited Zacharias in the Temple, while he was awake, fully functioning, and could converse with him, while the angel came to Joseph in a dream to make a proclamation, rather than give an explanation. The angel only gave Zacharias instructions as to what to name the child.

Other than giving the child the name John, the angel did not command Zacharias to do anything except that which he would normally have done anyway. It was not likely that Zacharias' wife would become pregnant, but at least there was some precedent for it.

Joseph, on the other hand, was being instructed by God to marry a woman that Joseph concretely knew was already pregnant, and not by himself. The angel assured Joseph that the pregnant woman was still a virgin, but how likely is that? Even if the angel were telling the truth, the situation would be unique in the history of the world. Who would believe it?

Joseph had every reason to bail out of the situation. Joseph had every right to a virginal wife, one that he could prove, by the tokens of virginity, had never been with another man. Joseph had every right to demand justice from Mary, who left home slim, trim and good looking, and came back home three months later with a pregnant belly. Joseph had every right to enjoy his wedding night with a virgin, not a woman that had already had a child.

Joseph had a decision to make. He could either believe a dream from God or the evidence of his eyes.

Zacharias, the priest in the temple, doubted God. Many of Jesus' followers, even after watching the miracles that Jesus did, turned away and chose not to believe in Him. Jesus healed the sick, raised the dead and cast out demons, and the scribes and Pharisees claimed that Jesus' miracles were performed by the Prince of Demons. Since people routinely doubt God even

though the evidence of their eyes confirms God's word, Joseph could have quite reasonably decided to not believe a dream and to put Mary away.

But, Joseph had faith in God. Not intellectual faith or theoretical faith, but actual faith. When God spoke to Joseph, even through an angel and even in a dream, Joseph had faith in that which God said. **Matthew 1:24-25** tells us:

24 Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife,

25 and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name JESUS.

Hebrews 11:1-2 tells us:

1 Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

2 For by it the elders obtained a good testimony.

Joseph's faith was part of God's plan. The prophecy of the birth of the Christ in **Micah 5:2** says:

2 "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Though you are little among the thousands of Judah, Yet out of you shall come forth to Me The One to be Ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth are from of old, From everlasting."

The prophecy was that the Christ would be born in Bethlehem. Joseph and Mary lived in Nazareth, 80 miles away. When my wife was eight months pregnant, she wanted to go to her brother's wedding in Muskegon, but the doctor forbade her from travelling in a car.

Why would a woman about to give birth leave her mother, her family and her whole support system and travel eighty miles, not in a car, but on a donkey, from Nazareth to Bethlehem where she has no place to stay and no women in her party to help her give birth just to fulfill some prophecy?

Well, because the Roman Government decreed that Mary's husband Joseph had to go. Had Joseph chosen not to marry Mary, she could have stayed at home with her parents and had the baby. But that we might marvel twenty one centuries later, God put the most unlikely set of circumstances into motion and orchestrated them through the faith of devout men and women so that we might know that the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem was no mere coincidence, and that we might see the finger of God in the affairs of men through the life of Jesus Christ even before he was old enough, humanly speaking, to influence our lives at all.

The remarkable set of prophecies and fulfillments surrounding the life of Christ give us reason to believe, reason to have faith, reason to recognize and be reason to be saved. **Luke 2:1-20** tells us:

1 And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.

2 This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria.

3 So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city.

4 Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David,

5 to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child.

6 So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered.

7 And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid

Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

8 Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.

9 And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid.

10 Then the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people.

11 For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

12 And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.”

13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying:

14 “Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!”

15 So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, “Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.”

16 And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger.

17 Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child.

18 And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

19 But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.

20 Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them.

Hebrews 11:1-2 tells us:

1 Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

2 For by it the elders obtained a good testimony.

As we celebrate the Christmas season of the miraculous birth of Jesus Christ, let us have faith that the God that navigates circumstances brought us the fulfillment of the prophecy of Jesus Christ. His miraculous virgin birth, His miracles, His death on the Cross, His burial in the tomb and then His Resurrection from the dead, are all improbable, but true. Let us exhibit the faith of Joseph and rejoice in this season, not only because of presents and festivities, but because Christ the Savior is born.

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