

“JOSEPH’S WONDERFUL OBEDIENCE”  
Isaiah 50:4-10, Hebrews 2:1-4, Matthew 1:18-25  
December 4 & 5, 2021

**How far are you willing to go to obey the Lord our God?** Would you be willing to risk your own life if God were the one calling you to do it? That’s a very difficult question for us to consider, but reflect upon what happened at “Fort Bragg, North Carolina: A likely clerical error sent a supply clerk with the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division out the door of an airplane on his first parachute jump without any formal training. Army Specialist Jeff Lewis, age 23 at the time, who landed unhurt, said he was just doing what a good soldier is supposed to do when he made the jump: Follow orders. ‘The Army said I was airborne-qualified.’ Lewis said. ‘I wasn’t going to question it.’”<sup>1</sup>

**Have you ever been pre-qualified to do something you’ve never been trained to do?** Of course you have. Anyone who is a parent has all of the qualifications to raise children, yet very few of us has ever received the training for such an endeavor. Parenting is one of the greatest callings for us as humans, for we have the responsibility to raise up the next generation in ways that will help them be healthy, happy and affective in all they do, hopefully obedient to the Lord our God. But most of us go into parenting having no clue what to do outside of what our parents did for us, good or bad.

Today we find an interesting account of a person being called to do something that he had not ever dreamed of doing. We hear of Joseph, son of Heli, a carpenter in the town of Nazareth, being called to take the role of the “father of Jesus” by taking Mary to be his wife. Although Joseph had probably anticipated having a family, what God was asking of him was far and beyond what he had ever expected. God had qualified him to become the husband of Mary, who was pregnant after accepting her own qualification from God to be the mother of our Lord. The problem was that they weren’t yet married, only betrothed (engaged). We heard about that last week. Listen to how Joseph gets his qualification notice. This is Matthew 1:18-25. (READ Matthew 1:18-25).

Now we must remember, according to Luke’s account, Mary spent three months with Elizabeth

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<sup>1</sup> (PreachingToday.com, Perfect Illustrations, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2002] pg. 196)

in the hill country of Judea (Luke 1:39) soon after her annunciation. Though she was betrothed to Joseph, Mary would have been pregnant those three months through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, and may have begun to show soon after her arrival back in Nazareth. We're not told if she talked to Joseph before she left for Judea, so **it was probably a great surprise for Joseph to find out that Mary was pregnant after she returned.**

Now, betrothal was a legally binding agreement between a man and a woman. Only a written divorce could break it, and infidelity at that stage was considered adultery. The marriage itself took place when the groom (already called the "husband") ceremoniously took the bride (called the "wife") home. Sexual union was to be reserved for that time when the "wife" moved in with her "husband." Only then was sexual intercourse proper. And there were possible serious consequences to either person if they were found to have broken that agreement.<sup>2</sup>

There doesn't seem to be any indication that Mary was trying to conceal her pregnancy, but Joseph must not have been informed of the work of the Holy Spirit before he found out that Mary was pregnant. So Mary was "*found to be with child*" (Matthew 1:18), and that disturbed Joseph to the point that he considered divorcing her. **However hurt that Joseph may have been, he did not want to retaliate against Mary by making a public spectacle of her.** In his mind there was only one way that a child could be conceived, and that was through a man's will. So he must have thought Mary to have been unfaithful to him.

I imagine that there were words shared between Mary and Joseph once he found out about her pregnancy, he asking how she could have done such a thing after agreeing to marry him. During her three month stay with Elizabeth, Mary would have been able to anticipate this, and would certainly have been able to explain to Joseph what had happened. But whether or not he believed her was another thing. So we are told that Joseph considered in his mind what he should do, and not wanting to hurt Mary, he decided to divorce her quietly. That meant that there would only need to be two other

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<sup>2</sup> (*The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Frank Gaebblein, editor, [Grand Rapids: Regency Reference Library, 1984] pg. 74)

witnesses to “approve” the divorce.

**Joseph may have thought about a variety of things as he considered his plan of divorce.**

First, he may have thought about **what it would mean if he married Mary**, how the people in the community would have seen his continuance in the marriage as his admission that the child was his, and that he was accepting responsibility for his guilty actions. Second, since premarital sex was strictly forbidden during the betrothal period, the people would have thought that **for Mary to suddenly become pregnant would have meant that either he, Joseph, had broken the Law, or that Mary had been unfaithful to him**. In considering his options, if Joseph went through with the marriage, it would have only raised questions about both of their integrity. His consideration of a “quiet divorce” would have allowed him to keep his righteousness intact and try to keep Mary from being stoned for adultery.

But that is when God intervened into the situation. Mary was still pregnant, and at that moment she was very vulnerable. If God’s Son were to come into the world of people, she would need to be protected at any cost. **So God sent an angel to challenge Joseph’s decision and let him in on what was really going on**. God wanted to qualify Joseph for the work that needed to be done to bring Jesus into the world. Nothing in all of his life had ever prepared him for doing such a thing, but God considered him qualified for the work, and put His call onto Joseph’s life to be Mary’s husband.

Although Mary had time to consider a response to people’s reactions, gaining courage from Elizabeth, Joseph was suddenly thrown into the heat of the situation all on his own. What was he going to do? How would people respond to him? What would his friends and family think of him? Would he lose business from the members of the Jewish community there in Nazareth? Would people forever question his integrity, or moral decision making? Certainly folks would jump to conclusions, especially when God had never done such a thing before. Would the Rabbis at the Temple allow him to continue to worship with everyone else, or would he be put out of the Temple. Certainly God saw how dedicated Joseph was in his faith in order for him to take on this huge role as the “father” of Mary’s child. But that didn’t make it any easier. **Joseph was called to do a tough thing.**

So God provided answers for Joseph in order to give him the most information needed to reconsider his choice. The message from the angel would have given him all the confidence that he needed to forge on ahead. It was God who was doing this, so Joseph would have to continue to put his trust in the Lord God and remain faithful to Him so that God's plan would come to fulfillment, even though he had no training in order to make it happen.

Did you hear what the angel told him? "*Joseph, descendant of David, do not be afraid to take Mary to be your wife. For it is by the Holy Spirit that she has conceived*" (Matt. 1:20). **Joseph was reminded that he is of the royal lineage of King David**, and that God desired to work within him to fulfill His plan of Salvation for the world. (We can see that lineage in the first 17 verses of Matthew 1.)

Joseph may have been immediately reminded of all of the others throughout Jewish history who God called into service to do strange or difficult things. Joshua had been called to lead the people of Israel into the Promised Land. Abraham had been called by God to become the father of many nations, challenged to move from his home town and go where God would lead him. Gideon was called by God to defeat a massive enemy army with only a few hundred men. Isaiah and Jeremiah had both been called by God to be prophets for the Lord to call the people of Israel back into worship of the Lord. It was not uncommon for God to direct faithful men to do His great work through the work of dreams or angelic visitation. Joseph was in line with those other men, called to risk his reputation in order to make sure that the Savior of all people would come into the world.

Then, Joseph was directed to "not be afraid to take Mary to be his wife." Yes, people would misunderstand. Yes, there would be questions about both of their integrity and faithfulness. Yes, there would be consequences within the community. **But whenever God calls us to do His great work, He always provides the resources and the guidance for us to make it happen.** What mattered was the faithful obedience of Joseph in order to make everything happen according to God's plan. That involved Joseph continuing the engagement of Mary and accelerate the wedding date. There would probably not be a festive celebration of marriage for the couple, but in following God's direction, Joseph

would be protecting Mary from any harm that could possibly come to her.

**But Joseph needed a reason to do all that God was asking of Him**, and it came in the explanation from the angel of what God was doing. *“For it is by the Holy Spirit that she has conceived. She will have a son, and you will name him Jesus – because he will save his people from their sins”* (Matt. 1:21). Indeed, it seems that Mary had been faithful to him after all, and because God was calling her to do this great work for Him, now it was Joseph’s turn to step up and be faithful to God’s call, too.

Well Joseph began to understand what God was doing, and he came to see that in order to bring the Savior into the world, it demanded unusual circumstances. The child was not conceived by human means. The child was the Son of God, conceived by the Holy Spirit, so He would be holy before the Lord. Notice that there is no mention of suffering or crucifixion at this time. That would be too much information for a person to understand. Joseph is told that this Son would live up to His name, Jesus, and would bring freedom to all His people, meaning all who would believe in Him as their Savior.

Now, unlike Mary’s annunciation, Joseph was not told about Jesus being *“great and will be called the Son of the Most High God.”* Joseph was not told that *“The Lord God will make Him a king, as His ancestor David was, and He will be the king of the descendants of Jacob forever; (that) His kingdom will never end”* (Luke 1:32)! **Joseph was told that Jesus would be the Messiah for the world, not just for the people of Israel.** It was God’s plan for the salvation of the world, and God was calling Joseph to be there to make sure that Jesus would have an earthly human life in order to accomplish this plan of Salvation.

And Joseph is told *“Now all this happened in order to make come true what the Lord had said through the prophet, ‘A virgin will become pregnant and have a son, and He will be called Immanuel’ (which means, ‘God is with us’)”* (Matthew 1:22-23). Joseph would have understood the fulfillment of this prophecy, and everything would begin to click in his head of what God was doing.

**Suddenly Joseph realized that God had qualified him to do this great work.** And though he had not had any forewarning or training, Joseph was called to do the extraordinary work of going

beyond all of what the people expected of him, and to follow God's orders as a man of faith. *"So when Joseph woke up, he married Mary, as the angel of the Lord had told him to. But he had no sexual relations with her before she gave birth to her son. And Joseph named him Jesus"* (Matt. 1:24-25).

**Joseph was willing to put his whole life on hold, change his plans for his life, and follow God's calling.** He became willing to sacrifice his integrity, his reputation, his business, and his friendships in order to follow the direction that God had called him to. And we're not told of what he had to endure from those in Nazareth by doing the work of the Lord. All we are told is that Joseph obeyed God's call and stepped out in faith to shelter Mary so that the Son of God could be born into the world. Because of his faithfulness, God provided for them, and guided Joseph to protect Jesus from anything that the world could have done to try to destroy Him before He could accomplish the work of Salvation. What Wonderful Obedience!

And it's that kind of faith that God has called each one of us to have in our lives, too, as He has called us to step out and be obedient to His call. While Joseph could have given up on his marriage to Mary, thinking himself to be too unworthy to do this great thing that God was calling him to do, **he remained steadfast in faith and did his very best so that the will of God would be completed.**

What a marvelous example for all of us today. In our world of quick criticism and misunderstanding of God's call in the lives of His faithful people, we can also count on facing difficult decisions based upon what it is that God is calling us to do. But we can also count on God's qualifying our lives to do His great work as we humble ourselves to His invitation and faithfully obey Him.

Take for example Pastor Luke from the country of Sudan. "Pastor Luke shared difficult good-byes with each of his five children and his wife before he trudged out of the refugee camp and back towards his ministry in Southern Sudan. It would be three months before he saw his family again, for his ministry is in one of the areas most afflicted by the civil war and the Islamic government's attacks.

"Pastor Luke's congregation has no church building because many buildings have been destroyed in almost two decades of Sudan's civil war. They meet each week in the shade of a large tree

into which a cross has been carved. Members sit on the ground or stand during the services while Pastor Luke stands near the carved cross and preaches.

“If Pastor Luke had stayed with his family, he would have time with them each day. Of course, aid workers would continue to provide food to the displaced Sudanese, tending to their physical needs. But who would take his place if he did not go back to his village?

“Luke ministers in a region that previously had no functioning church. He is obeying God’s command to be salt and light in a war-torn area. It is difficult – sometimes agonizing – for Pastor Luke to leave his family. Yet God has rewarded his sacrifice with a vibrant and growing ‘tree church.’

“...If we are to follow God’s plans for our lives, that road will often take us away from the familiar and towards the unknown. While our journey may separate us from loved ones, home, comfort, and security, we are never separated from the love of Christ. His love is our constant companion, and thus we are never really alone...If you are confident that you are following God’s will for your life, then you must stick to the task. Christ will be your constant companion.”<sup>3</sup>

God was faithful to Joseph as he remained faithful to God. I would think that the words we heard from Isaiah 50 today would have rung in Joseph’s ears as he worked at being an obedient servant of the Lord. *“The Sovereign Lord has taught me what to say, so that I can strengthen the weary. Every morning He makes me eager to hear what He is going to teach me. The Lord has given me understanding, and I have not rebelled or turned away from Him. I bared my back to those who beat me. I did not stop them when they insulted me, when they pulled out the hairs of my beard and spit in my face. But their insults cannot hurt me because the Sovereign Lord gives me help. I brace myself to endure them. I know that I will not be disgraced, for God is near, and He will prove me innocent”* (Is. 50:4-8a).

Many think that Joseph had a minor role in the birth of Jesus. Though the Scriptures point to Mary much of the time because she gave birth to Jesus, Joseph was a key element in Mary’s safety as he

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<sup>3</sup> (The Voice of the Martyrs, *Extreme Devotion*, [Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2001] pg. 257)

gave of himself to be obedient to the call of God. Though his life could have been so much less stressful had he not obeyed what the angel told him to do, **because of his obedience, Joseph provided the security needed to both Mary and Jesus**, as he did all that was asked of him.

So I ask you again, “How far are you willing to go to obey the Lord our God? Would you be willing to risk your own life if God were the one calling you to do it?” God sees the past, the present and the future, so He knows what needs to be done to accomplish His plan of Salvation. He is calling you to be willing to give of yourself to follow Him with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, so that His work might be completed.

But we only see the present and yet we can learn from the past in order to make the changes we must make in our lives to be obedient to God’s call. We don’t know what God has in store for us, but He qualifies us to do His work, even though we may not be trained in that area. **When we say “Yes” to God’s call in our life, God then gives us all that we need to make it happen** – assurance of His call, confidence to face the future unafraid, and the guidance we need to take each step according to His plan. Of course the question is, “Will we be obedient to God’s call and follow Him, even though the request may seem countercultural or absolutely ludicrous?”

I pray that each of us would be open to hear God’s call for our lives and be as obedient to that call as Joseph was when God called Him. Keep the faith! **Stand strong in your obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ and watch what the Lord can do through you.** Let’s pray...

Father, thank You for calling Joseph to do this difficult task. Thank You for guiding and strengthening him to take up all that You asked him to do. Thank You for His marvelous example of obedience to Your call, so that we might consider such obedience in our own lives. Open up our hearts and minds to hear Your call for us today. Enable us the courage we need to stand strong as Your people, even those around us misunderstand Your plan. Give us the endurance we need to live for You every minute of our lives. Guide us and direct our paths so that we might accomplish Your work in our lives, for it is in Jesus’ Name that we pray. AMEN.