

## **THE HUSBAND WHO KEPT THE FAITH**

Matthew 1:18-25

During Advent, we are like impatient children who can't wait for Christmas morning to open our gifts. Hope is like that. *Hope is the joyful expectation of something that is not yet realized.* It's like the hope in C.S. Lewis's story *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, that one day Aslan will come to break the White Witch's power over Narnia and bring springtime. It's rejoicing in the assurance that something good is on the way. It's the hope that is sustained by faith. And that brings us to Joseph.

Not much is known of Joseph. A lot of what is known is speculation. Joseph is the person behind the scenes in the Christmas story. He is always there, always faithful, always on time, but he is never in the limelight. He never takes center stage.

But what is there is enough to give us a down-to-earth picture of a real man with real faith who struggles with what it will mean to be faithful to the promise of God. What do we learn from Joseph and his faith?

### **1. Joseph teaches us that faith balances justice and mercy.**

On one occasion in His ministry, the Pharisees brought a woman to Jesus whom had been caught in adultery. Intent on humiliated her and trapping Jesus, they stood the woman in the middle of the group and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us

to stone such women. Now what do you say?" The Law in question is found in both Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22, which states that both the man and the woman caught in adultery should be stoned. So, the first obvious question is, "Where was the man the woman committed adultery with?"

There is no evidence that in Jesus' day the Pharisees, or any other Jews for that matter, were carrying out this law in a literal way. (More than likely the Romans would not have allowed it.) Thus, the sole purpose of this encounter was to humiliate the woman and trap Jesus.

Jesus did not take the bait. Instead, He "bent down and started to write on the ground with His finger. Halfway through writing He stood back up and said, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." And then He stooped back down and continued writing. People have speculated what He wrote, but the Bible doesn't say. Apparently what He wrote, along with what He said, embarrassed the accusers, and so one by one they left until Jesus was alone with the adulteress.

"Jesus straightened up and asked her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?'

'No one, sir,' she said.

'Then neither do I condemn you,' Jesus declared. 'Go now and leave your life of sin.'"

Justice demanded that the woman receive some type of punishment. Instead, Jesus embarrassed her accusers and showed mercy to the accused. Where did He learn such faith? You could say, "Well, He is God and didn't have to learn it." But that's too simplistic. Remember, while Jesus was (and is) God, He

was also as human as you and I. And so I ask again, “Where did Jesus learn to balance justice and mercy?”

I suggest He learned it from Joseph, His earthly father.

Matthew tells us that Joseph was a righteous man; a man who lived by the Old Testament law. That law said that when Mary turned up pregnant, she could have been severely punished. If Joseph had been only righteous, Mary would have been dead. But instead, Matthew tells us that Joseph “did not want to expose her to public disgrace,” and so he decided to “divorce her quietly.” *Being faithful to God meant that while he respected the law, he acted in mercy.*

Rumors about Mary’s pregnancy were evidently still floating around Nazareth 30 years later. I wonder if, about the time Jesus was old enough to understand the gossip, Joseph may have taken Him aside and said, “Son, there’s something I need to tell You.” I wonder if, the day when the righteous people were ready to stone the adulterous woman Jesus might have remembered that His mother could have received the same punishment. I wonder if the accusers were some of the same people who had accused Mary. I wonder if Jesus wrote His mother’s name in the dirt. When Jesus saved that woman, I wonder if He might have been thinking of the way Joseph honored the law but acted in mercy to save His mother’s life.

I wonder if we are like the Pharisees. How hard do we try to balance justice and mercy? I don’t know about you, but I would rather be guilty of showing too much mercy instead of always insisting on justice. Do you know why? Because God has shown me far more mercy than He has justice, and for that I am extremely thankful.

## **2. Joseph shows us that faith is visionary.**

Real faith isn't afraid to believe that improbable, even impossible things might actually come true. It took a dream and an angel to convince him, but Joseph was able to see past the present into the future. Listen to Matthew's account:

“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 be with child and will give birth to a Son, and they will call Him Immanuel!’—which means, ‘God with us.’”

Faith isn't blind; it's visionary. It doesn't deny the improbable but hopes for the impossible. Faith keeps hope alive because it can see things that other people cannot see.

I wonder if the boy Jesus saw something of that kind of faith in Joseph. Later, when Jesus saw ordinary fishermen and called them to be fishers of people, or when He saw a tax collector and called him to be a disciple, or when He taught His disciples to pray that God's kingdom would come and God's will be done on earth as it is already fulfilled in heaven, or when He saw a dying thief on a cross and promised that he would be with Him in paradise, I wonder if He

might have been living out of the faith He had seen in Joseph; a faith that was not afraid to believe that improbable, even impossible things, might actually come true.

### **3. Joseph demonstrates for us that faith is obedient.**

Once Jesus woke up from his dream, “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.” Incredible, isn’t it? Joseph immediately put his faith in action through obedience!

Every time Joseph appears in the gospel he is facing a crisis. His story begins with the crisis over Mary’s unexpected pregnancy, followed by the crisis of the forced journey to Bethlehem and the lack of room in the inn, followed by the multiple crises of the threat from King Herod and life as a refugee in Egypt. I suspect that through it all he kept reminding himself of the way the angel said, “Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”

All Joseph had to go on was the hope that he, his wife, and the child would somehow become a part of God’s work of salvation in human history, but somehow, that was enough.

Notice also that Joseph never speaks. All the other actors in the Christmas drama have speaking parts.

Elizabeth, Zechariah, and Mary have songs that are nothing short of showstoppers.

The angels make the gospel sound like something from Andrew Lloyd Webber.

The shepherds talk about going to Bethlehem, and then they tell everyone what they saw.

The wise men ask the defining question of Mathew's Gospel: "*Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?*"

Like ruthless rulers in every age, Herod speaks with cunning to the wise men and with arrogance to everyone else.

But Joseph never speaks. The closest we get to hearing his voice is when Matthew records that "he gave him the name Jesus."

Joseph doesn't speak; Joseph acts! Almost every time Joseph is mentioned by Matthew, he is the subject of an active verb.

Matthew 1:19: "Joseph...*had in mind* to divorce her quietly."

Matthew 1:20: "After he had *considered* this..."

Matthew 1:24: "When Joseph *woke up*, he *did* what the angel of the Lord commanded him."

Matthew 2:14: "So he *got up*, *took* the child and His mother during the night and left for Egypt."

Matthew 2:21-22: "So he *got up*, *took* the child and His mother and went to the land of Israel...Having been warned in a dream, he *withdrew* to the district of Galilee."

Matthew 2:23: "And he *went* and *lived* in a town called Nazareth."

There's not a passive verb in the script. Joseph acts. He cares to follow God's call into an utterly unpredictable future. He demonstrated the truth of

William Sloane Coffin's words: "The leap of faith is not a leap of thought but of action... Faith is not believing without proof; it's trusting without reservation."

Joseph is like men and women in every age who are willing to act in obedience to the will and way of God with little regard for the consequences.

For Joseph, keeping the faith meant taking action in obedience to the call of God. I wonder if something of Joseph's faith was present with Jesus in the wilderness of temptation when our Lord wrestled with whether He would be obedient to the call of God on His life. I wonder if Joseph's regardless-of-risk faith was with Jesus when "Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem." I wonder if something that Jesus saw in Joseph helped sustain Him in the Garden of Gethsemane when He said, "Not My will but Yours be done."

## **CONCLUSION**

Joseph was a man whose actions spoke louder than his words. He serves as an example to us of how faith balances justice and mercy; faith is visionary; and faith is obedient.

This Christmas, is there someone in your family, or at work, or in your neighborhood who you need to demonstrate your faith to by showing mercy instead of justice?

Has God been trying to show you something lately that seems improbable and impossible? Is He trying to get you to step out on faith and follow His vision for your life?

This Christmas, do you need to put your faith in action, and in complete

obedience follow Him?