

December 10, 2023

Mary & Joseph

Journey to Bethlehem - A Labor of Love

The traditional Christmas story from the Gospel of Luke begins this way: ***“In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world” (Luke 2:1).*** Most of us read those words without giving them a second thought.

Actually, Caesar Augustus was the greatest of the Roman emperors, greater even than his granduncle, Julius Caesar. It was said that when he came to Rome it was a city of brick, and when he left it was a city of marble. Caesar Augustus reigned as emperor for 41 years. During that time he gave to the world the famed *pax romana*, the great Roman Peace that spread across the Mediterranean world.

His greatest single act—the one which would have the most lasting effect on world history—was to call for a census of the empire. The census would produce a list of property owners for the purpose of collecting taxes. It was a thoroughly secular decree, the kind of thing governments have been doing since the beginning of time.

Historians tell us that it is not likely that the whole empire was enrolled at the same time. Given the slow system of communication in those days, it might have taken several years for the census to be completed in some of the outlying provinces. A lot would depend on

the willingness of local rulers to cooperate.

When the time came to take the census in Israel, it is possible that a compromise was made to take into account Jewish custom. The Romans ordinarily enrolled men where they were currently living, but the Jews counted families according to their ancestral hometowns. That would explain why Joseph and Mary had to return to Bethlehem at a most inconvenient time—in the ninth month of Mary’s pregnancy.

This much is certain. Caesar Augustus never met Joseph or Mary and he never knew of a certain Jewish baby born in a village outside of Jerusalem. When Augustus died, they mourned as if a god had died. Little did they know his call for a census had been used by God to bring His Son to the earth.

So, Merry Christmas, Caesar Augustus. You played a part you never knew and paved the way for the birthday of a King.

When the story opens Mary is “pledged” to Joseph. That meant that she had formally agreed to marry him but the “wedding” had not yet taken place. The “pledge” and the “wedding feast” were usually separated by six months to a year. *During that period the couple did not live together and did not consummate their marriage physically.* Following the custom of that day, Mary would live with her parents and Joseph with his. After the public wedding feast, Mary and Joseph would live together as husband and wife.

Everything in Luke 1-2 happens against that background. Mary is a teenager living with her parents, waiting with happy anticipation for the day of her wedding.

It is right at this point that God breaks in. He is about to ask an unknown teenage girl to take part in something so shocking as to be totally unbelievable.

Luke 1:26–38...²⁶In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man named Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, "Rejoice, favored woman! The Lord is with you." ²⁹But she was deeply troubled by this statement and was wondering what kind of greeting this could be. ³⁰Then the angel told her: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹Now listen: You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will call His name JESUS. ³²He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end." ³⁴Mary asked the angel, "How can this be, since I have not known a man?" ³⁵The angel replied to her: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the holy child to be born will be called the Son of God. ³⁶And consider Elizabeth your relative even she has conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸ Then Mary said: "Behold, I am the

Lord's servant," said Mary. "May it be done to me according to your word." Then the angel left her.

What God asks Mary to do will change her life forever. ***Luke 1:38. ³⁸ Then Mary said: "Behold, I am the Lord's servant," said Mary. "May it be done to me according to your word."***

This is one of the greatest statements of faith in the entire Bible.

Perhaps it happened something like this. It's the middle of the afternoon and your mother tells you go fetch some water. On your way to the well, you encounter a man who turns out to be the angel Gabriel. He tells you that even though you are a virgin, you will conceive and give birth to a child who will be the Son of God. When you ask how, the angel says, ***"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you"*** (Luke 1:35).

What do you say to that? Mary said Yes. Yes to God, Yes to the impossible, Yes to the plan of God. Did her heart skip a beat when she said Yes? There she is, teen head tilted high, her hands trembling just a bit, wide-eyed, nervous, open-mouthed, questioning but not afraid, wondering but not terrified, unsure but not uncertain. When the angel said, ***"Nothing is impossible with God"*** (Luke 1:37), Mary took a deep breath and replied, ***"May it be to me as you have said."***

Some Lessons We Can Learn From Mary

<https://thankfulhomemaker.com/10-lessons-from-the-life-of-mary/>

1. Mary was filled with the Spirit.

And the angel answered her, “*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.*” ~Luke 1:35

As believers, we have the Holy Spirit working in us, and there is nothing we can accomplish for God outside the power of the Holy Spirit. Do you tap into the power of the Spirit, or do you rely on your strength to get through difficult situations and trials? May we submit our lives to Him working in and through us.

2. Mary said “yes” to God’s plan for her life.

And Mary said, “*Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.*” *And the angel departed from her.* ~ Luke 1:38

She had an obedient, submissive, and a humble heart. Are we willing to say, “yes Lord,” to whatever task He calls us? May we be faithful, obedient servants.

3. Mary was a woman of worship.

And Mary said, “*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.*” ~Luke 1:46-47

She gave praise to her Lord knowing that the road before her was going to be a difficult one. Do we praise Him in and through all circumstances in our lives?

4. Mary knew God’s Word.

Mary said...He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.” ~ Luke 1:54-55

In the time Mary lived she was probably illiterate, but she had heard the Word of God and kept it hidden in her heart. How well do we know God’s Word? Are we able to speak the Words of His truth to others? Is our time in the Word an important part of our day?

5. Mary quietly trusted God and meditated on all He had done in her life and waited on His timing. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. ~Luke 2:19

A virgin betrothed to be married, and she just had a visitation from an angel of the Lord telling her she is to give birth to the Son of God. How do you explain this one to Joseph? Mary didn’t take matters into her own hands but let the Lord change Joseph’s heart. How often are we truly quiet before the Lord, just pondering on what He has done and is doing in our lives? Do we take the time to meditate on His Word?

Adapted from [10 Lessons from the Life of Mary - Thankful Homemaker](https://thankfulhomemaker.com/10-lessons-from-the-life-of-mary/).
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Now Let's Look at Joseph, the earthly guardian/father of Jesus

Joseph has been rightly called the forgotten man of Christmas. It is natural that most of our attention should focus on Mary since she gave birth to Jesus. *Nowhere in the birth accounts do we have any recorded words of Joseph.*

But we do have an account of his encounter with an angel and his obedience to God's will...

Matthew 1:18-25... ¹⁸ *Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit.* ¹⁹ *And her husband Joseph, since he was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly.* ²⁰ *But when he had thought this over, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.* ²¹ *She will give birth to a Son; and you shall name Him Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."* ²² *Now all this took place so that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet would be fulfilled:* ²³ **"BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN WILL CONCEIVE AND GIVE BIRTH TO A SON, AND THEY SHALL NAME HIM IMMANUEL,"** *which translated means, "GOD WITH US."* ²⁴ *And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife,* ²⁵ *but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he named Him Jesus.*

Who is this man known as Joseph? He appears on the stage of history for a few moments and then disappears.

Here is what we know about him:

-His father was Jacob.

-His family hometown was Bethlehem in Judea, but he lived in Nazareth in Galilee. That meant that Joseph and Mary had to travel about 80 miles in order to register for the census.

-He is from the royal line of David. The genealogy in Matthew 1 makes that clear.

-He was a carpenter by trade.

-He was a poor man. We know that because when he and Mary presented Jesus in the Temple, they brought two birds (either doves or pigeons) to sacrifice (Luke 2:24). Jews only did that when they could not afford a lamb.

-He was a keeper of the Law.

Now Mary turns up pregnant. Joseph only knows one thing for sure. He's not the father.

What words describe a man at a time like this? Anger . . . Confusion . . . Frustration . . . Embarrassment . . . Shame . . . Rage . . . Disappointment.

What did he say to her? What did she say to him? Did she tell him about the angel Gabriel? If she did, can you blame him for not believing her? Did he say to her, "Mary, how could you? You were pledged to me. We were going to get married. I was going to build a little house for us in Nazareth. Mary, Mary, how could you do this? Why, Mary, why? I kept myself for you. Why couldn't you keep yourself for me?"

I think Joseph cried harder that day than he had ever cried in his life.

Matthew 1:24-25 reveal some of Joseph's finest qualities:

²⁴ And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife, ²⁵ but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus.

Every step he takes testifies to his greatness:

1. By marrying her quickly he broke Jewish custom, but he protected Mary's reputation. She was pregnant and he wasn't the father but he married her anyway.

2. By keeping her a virgin until Jesus was born, he protected the miracle of Jesus' conception by the Holy Spirit against slander by unbelievers.

3. By naming the baby he exercised a father's prerogative and thus officially took him into his family as his own son, as well as showed submission and obedience to God's will.

Joseph stands as a model of a godly man:

He was tough when he could have been weak.

He was tender when he could have been harsh.

He was thoughtful when he could have been hasty.

He was trusting when he could have doubted.

Some portions Adapted from Ray Pritchard Keep Believing Ministries Tupelo, Mississippi
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Conclusion:

Mary & Joseph are godly examples of willingness to follow God's will, of faith, of humbleness and obedience. May we follow their example in our lives today and for the rest of our days.