

Joseph's Dream
Matthew 1:18-25

What would you do if you were Joseph? What would you do if the woman to whom you were engaged, the woman with whom you had desired to spend the rest of your life – what if she had said to you, “I am going to have a baby, and it’s not yours.” What would you do?

For most men, of course the engagement would be called off – no question about it. And that’s Joseph’s initial reaction as well. But notice that even if he was convinced of Mary’s faithlessness, he had still decided to break off the engagement with as little fanfare as possible, to minimize the pain Mary is feeling. He was still thinking of what is best for her. That’s what true love does.

But the selflessness of love doesn’t always lessen its pain. “How could she do this to me? And whose baby is it, anyway?” We can imagine Joseph’s mind roiling with such questions as he finally found fitful sleep.

But in the morning, what a change has come over him. He rises from his bed, and takes Mary to be his wife. He has resolved to ignore the inevitable small-town gossip, the whispers about Mary’s unfaithfulness. He has resolved to adopt the child as his own, even though he knows that he is not the father. What has come over him? How can we explain the change?

Simply put, Joseph has found out that this is no normal pregnancy, and that Mary has in fact been faithful to him all along. An angel of the Lord has told Joseph in a dream that God is the Father of the child. And that is enough for Joseph to go through with the marriage, and to support and care for Mary as she delivered the baby.

But what would they name Him? That’s always the first thing we want to know about a new baby, isn’t it? In many families, names get used and reused for generations, sometimes to the point that it’s hard to know exactly who is being talked about.

But Joseph’s family was different. If we were to look back at the list of the names in Joseph’s family tree at the beginning of this chapter, we would find only one name on the list twice – a Jacob was both the grandson of Abraham and the father of Joseph, Mary’s husband. But these two Jacobs are about 2000 years apart, so they couldn’t possibly be confused.

But you know, even back during the days when Joseph’s ancestors were royal sons of David, there was no David II, or David III. The Jews simply did not name their kings like the French who got all the way to eighteen Louis or the English who reached eight Henrys. So why don't these people name folks after parents or previous kings?

The answer is as simple as it is profound. Biblical names are often looking, not to the past, but to the future. Biblical names are prophetic. And so, Joseph and Mary did not name their baby in the hopes that he would be like one of their ancestors. Instead, they named Him for what He would do in the future.

In fact, there are three names in this chapter for the baby, three names which tell us something about His life and ministry. Matthew calls Him Christ. The angel calls Him Jesus. And Isaiah the prophet calls Him Immanuel. Let's examine each of these names in turn.

Christ is a Greek word that Matthew uses in verse 18 in place of the Hebrew word Messiah. But Christ and Messiah both mean the same thing: the Anointed One. In the Old Testament, there were two types of public officials who were anointed, having oil poured over them to mark them as set apart for a special task or ministry. Priests were anointed, and kings were anointed.

After looking at the genealogy in chapter one of Matthew's gospel, we are especially in mind of the kings. The main point of that list, after all, is to show us that Jesus is the rightful heir to the throne of King David. The genealogy demonstrates that Jesus is the promised ruler whom God would anoint to rule and reign over all the people of God over all the earth for all eternity.

Now, we know that Jesus' own generation didn't recognize His authority. We know that the Jerusalem crowd turned on Him and crucified Him. But their disobedience could not alter Jesus' identity. Their rejection of Jesus didn't change the fact that Jesus really is the Messiah, the Anointed One of God, the One to Whom all authority in Heaven and on earth has already been given.

Oh, yes, there will come a day when every knee will bow to Him, and every tongue will confess that He is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. But Jesus Christ is already the King of kings. He is already the Lord of lords, regardless of what people may think about Him.

And it is not hard to imagine Joseph sharing these expectations of the Messiah. After all, he knew of his own lineage, because the angel addresses Joseph as the "son of David" in verse 20. It is thus likely that Joseph understood that Mary's baby would be a king.

And that's because of the second name given to the baby: the angel said that Joseph must call the child "Jesus" – in Hebrew, "Yeshua." It comes from the Hebrew word for "to save," and that's exactly what people in Joseph's time expected their Messiah to do – to save them from the Romans. Yeshua was also the name of the great Hebrew general whom we call Joshua, the extraordinary leader who had led God's people in driving out the Canaanites from the land after

the exodus. So when the angel told Joseph to call the child "Jesus," Joseph probably had messianic visions of Joshua the general dancing in his head.

But the angel has other ideas. He says in verse 21 that the child's name should be Jesus because he will save His people, not from the Romans, but from their sins. Thus, Joseph should not expect the child to be a great general, but a savior in a more spiritual way.

This probably made no sense at all to Joseph, given the ideas that Jews of that day had about the military nature of the messiah. To make matters worse, kings weren't supposed to get involved in religious affairs. They weren't allowed to because of their genealogy, for one thing.

You see, the priests were in charge of making atonement for the people through the temple rituals, and the priests had to come from the tribe of Levi. On the other hand, the kings of the Davidic dynasty all came from the tribe of Judah. So what the angel said to Joseph just didn't make sense. How could the Judaic Messiah take on the Levitical priestly duty of making atonement for the sins of the people?

Over 1000 years earlier, King David himself had gotten a glimpse of the answer as he wrote Psalm 110. As we read in this morning's responsive reading, God the Father tells the Messiah to "rule in the midst of thine enemies," as a king. But He also says to the Messiah, "Thou art a priest forever."

The writer of the New Testament book of Hebrews helps us understand what all this means. He also points out that the priesthood of the Messiah is much greater than that of Levi and Aaron. For Jesus would not make atonement for sins "through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood. He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption." He "offered Himself without blemish to God," in order to "cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God." Jesus' shed blood has thus paid the penalty for the sins of all His people, so that no one who is found in Him will be found guilty in the Day of Judgment.

The Christ is our Messiah, our Lord and King. We must obey Him. But Jesus is our Savior, Who has died in our place that God's wrath may be turned away from us and that we might live in newness of life.

But how can a man do this? We know that Jesus was spotless and sinless. We know that because there was no death penalty due to Him for His own sin, He could thus undergo the death penalty for someone else. We can understand how the perfect sacrifice of one man can truly be a substitute for the guilt and sin of another.

But how could one man's death be sufficient to cover the sins of all the multitudes of people who call on His name? How could the sacrifice of one man pay for the sins of the whole world?

We can understand this puzzle if we look at the third name for the child – Immanuel. In Isaiah 7:14, the prophet says, "Behold the virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which translated means, "God with us."

Here is the most astounding truth of all. And here is the reason that Jesus can be the savior of the whole world. He is not just a perfect, sinless man, who lived in perfect harmony with the will of His Father. He is not just the best example of a man who showed us how we might walk in the light of the Spirit. He and the Father are one. He is the eternal Word of God who became flesh and dwelt among us. Jesus of Nazareth is not only the Messiah. He is God.

And because Jesus is God, His sacrifice of Himself is of infinite worth. His blood is able to cover the sins, not just of one other man, but of all His people. His death is able to turn away the wrath of God from all those who are worthy of condemnation. Because He died, none of His people have to die. Because He rose from the dead, all of His people are assured that they too will rise from the dead one day.

Yes, the child who would be born to Mary would be Messiah and Savior and God-with-us. But how did all that make a difference for Joseph? How did Joseph come to a new understanding of his role in the raising of this child? How did Joseph overcome his fears and doubts and suspicions?

Well, the thing that made the difference in Joseph's life is the same thing that can make a difference in your life and my life today. For Joseph could have decided that his dream was just a dream. After all, how believable is all of this? How believable is it that the son born to Mary would not only be the Messiah, but the savior of His people and indeed be God Himself? Joseph could have washed away the memory of that dream, dismissing it as mere overwrought imagination. Joseph could have carried out his plan to break off the engagement.

But instead, Joseph believed. Joseph believed the angel. Joseph believed Mary. But most importantly, Joseph placed his faith in God, and in God's promises. And so he married Mary. And so they named the child Yeshua, Jesus, just as the angel had told them to.

What about us? We have just heard the same words that Joseph heard. We thus face the same facts that Joseph faced. And the same decision faces us. We can decide that this is all just a story, a dream, a fairy tale for children. But if this is our conclusion, then we are the real

dreamers. We are the ones kidding ourselves. And we are the ones who will die in our sins with no one to save us.

Or we can embrace God's truth, just as Joseph did. And that same truth can change our lives and fill them with joy. If we trust God's truth we can rejoice this day because Christ, our Messiah has in fact come to rule over the world in righteousness and truth. Come, let us obey his law of love.

If we trust God's truth we can rejoice this day because Jesus, our Savior has come to take away our sins and to deliver us from the power of evil. Come, let us turn away from sin and follow Him.

And if we trust God's truth we can rejoice that Immanuel, the God who made the heavens and earth with a Word has taken on flesh and visited His people. Come, let us trust Him. Come, let us worship Him. Come, let us give our lives to Him. Come, let us adore Him.

Hymn of Praise 103 O Come, All Ye Faithful

Benediction

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy,
to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, *be* glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever.