

Joseph's Dilemma: Following Christ into Rejection

Matthew 1:18-25

Spence Shelton - December 11, 2016

Intro

On July 30th of this year Luke Aikins jumped out of a plane flying at 25,000 feet. What made the jump newsworthy was that Luke was attempting to be the first person in history to jump from a plane and successfully land in a net on the ground below....WITHOUT A PARACHUTE! When he jumped out of the plane he could not even see the landing net. It wasn't until he was considerably lower that he could find it. But, he adjusted once he saw it...maneuvered into position and at 5 seconds before impact guess what he does...he flips over and looks up at the sky. Hoping he lands where he was aiming. That was the scariest part to me. Well, he the stuck the landing. Otherwise this illustration would really be morbid and misplaced. When asked on the today show why he did it...a really good question...he said "well, I thought it'd be cool to do." Just a beacon of inspiration this guy.

In our passage today, our main character Joseph is asked by God to do something that seems at the outset to be a pretty extreme decision. It's one that feels like jumping out of the plane without a parachute. And maybe blindfolded. And hoping the guy who asked you to jump really did put that net down there he said he'd put up.

See Joseph is put in a position where he has to go all-in with God or not. He's gotta either jump out of the plane and hope God catches him or he's got to say no to God. And here in Joseph's dilemma I think we are going to see real Christianity separate itself from the easy believism that runs pretty thick in our culture just like it ran pretty thick in Joseph's. And this is why I think we need Joseph's dilemma.

Because we live in an area where a lot of people will throw in with Jesus when its easy. When friends are all doing it, when the general public kind of nods approvingly, basically a lot of people will follow Jesus when that naturally fits into their lifestyle. But when that changes, when following Jesus means going against the flow of traffic, when it means going the opposite direction of your friends...that's when many fall away.

I hear it kind of like this: Many would like to follow Jesus, but it's just hard. The parts in the bible about how you can have an abundant life like in John 10:10...oh those are great and you want those. But when you read the parts about people getting killed for their faith...well that's not too

pleasant. When you read about the sacrifice God calls believers to...to sacrifice their time, their money, their preferences, their desires, man that sounds pretty extreme. I'll take the abundant life stuff only please. But today I think we'll see that's just not how it works. You either jump out of the plane or you stay in it.

Today in the birth story of Jesus we are going to see the unfiltered truth about what it costs to follow Jesus and then where the strength to follow Jesus comes from.

We'll walk through the story first though to get familiar with the situation so here we go.

[18] Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. [19] And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.

ok we just got a whole lot of information. So first thing you gotta know right outta the gate is that betrothal, in this age, is much more serious than our idea of engagement is today.

Remember in that day and culture parents usually chose the spouse you would marry. Ok once the spouse was chosen then the families entered into this betrothal stage. This stage was about a year and it was to ensure that the woman was sexually pure. Remember also in this situation

the groom's parents usually paid a "bride price" to the bride's parents. This payment was a part of the whole prenuptial arrangements. (Some of you parents of daughters are like "oooo that'd be nice." Well, I've got two boys and two girls so no matter what is customary I don't see weddings being cash positive events for me.)

The idea behind the betrothal is in essence the groom's family protecting their investment. I know that sounds a little crude but that's what the point was. So Joseph and Mary were married in every other sense. Even legally, they just couldn't have sex or live together for this first year. This was a legally binding engagement that could only be broken by formal process of divorce.

And lo and behold Joseph learns his wife is pregnant. And there is only one way she gets pregnant ya'll...she must have had an affair. Look can you imagine the scene for a second? Some of you don't have to imagine how Joseph was feeling because you've been there. The humiliation. The embarrassment. The girl he's just married but isn't allowed to sleep with...telling him she's pregnant? And then she tries to lie about it "The Holy Spirit" did it. The audacity.

Yet still Joseph wants to be a good guy in all of this. Deut 22.23-24 lays out the Jewish law that Mary could be stoned to death for this act. But Joseph being what Matthew calls a "just man" wants to figure a way out of this that doesn't shame Mary. Now listen, any *quiet* way out of this will result in Joseph getting a real hit on his reputation. Because

if he doesn't tell everybody she's had an affair, well then they will all assume he's the daddy and he's hanging her out to dry? So its not a great situation but he wants to protect her as much as he can so that's his decision.

[20] But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. [21] She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

WHOA. That is one trippy dream right? Well, God commonly spoke to people in dreams this way throughout the bible so don't be too quick to write this off as the effect of some bad Matzo Balls he'd eaten the night before. In fact many scholars say this wasn't even while he was sleeping. It was "as he considered these things" almost more like a vision than a sleepytme dream.

The angel, Gabriel says don't be afraid! Take Mary as your wife. The baby is from the Holy Spirit. Which means... she's still pure. God is doing something here!

And this baby boy is going to save his people from their sins. *That's huge we'll come back to that.* This kid is going to be special joseph. And then the angel is gone. And Matthew our author drops in a little editorial aside to show us the story behind the story. Remember that is always happening

with Matthew. He sees something so much bigger happening so he says

[22] All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:[23] "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us). He's citing Isaiah 7. Same chapter he already cited up in the genealogy now he's coming back for more in Isaiah 7 verse 14.

[14] Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

Ok, the virgin prophecy...hold on to that we are coming back in a minute I promise. First: Emmanuel. This word is the transliteration of the Hebrew word meaning "God with us." As far as our info goes, nobody ever called Jesus this. Why in here? To relay to you exactly who Jesus is. I think this is the only time Matthew translates a word to make sure his readers understand it. Why? Because remember Matthew is writing this all down after the fact. And Matthew knows how important this idea of "God with us" really is. In fact have you ever noticed that in Matthew Jesus enters and exits under this title? He enters the scene right here with the name "God with us." And as he's ascending into heaven in Matthew 28 you know what he tells them? His very last words?

Matthew 28.[20] teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, **I am with you** always, to the end of the age.”

Those are the last words in Matthew’s gospel. See this name is much more than a name. It’s a promise. And some of you need to leave today totally changed because you finally understand the power of God being with you. The power to walk through life with hope, with peace, and with joy. That power isn’t something you conjure up. It isn’t something where you can fake it til you make it. It’s the power of God himself residing with you. I’m getting ahead though. let’s finish the story...

[24] When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife,[25] but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus. (Matthew 1:18-25 ESV)

Joseph obeyed God. That’s the giant takeaway today. When faced with an impossible situation, when asked to jump out of a plane without a parachute, Joseph obeyed God. So goes the birth story of Jesus. Think about this whole scene for a minute. Why did God do this this way? He could have sent his legion of angels down and made a public announcement to the whole region “Mary is the chosen virgin woman to carry the boy who will be the savior of the world! She is still pure and Joseph is a great guy! Go buy things from his carpentry business over on Elm Street.”

That’s not what happened. Instead both of their reputations get ruined.

Joseph is seen as the moral deviant who knocked up his betrothed wife.

And Mary? She didn’t exactly get her storybook wedding did she? Where she and her new groom were finally brought together and the families had a wonderful evening of celebration at this new union. No instead she gets looks, she gets rumors. Who knows, the bible is pretty silent on this we just know that this unexpected pregnancy doesn’t make Mary celebrated *in her time*.

In fact these two would have to flee from Bethlehem, from their home, shortly because of Jesus. So the question remains why do it this way God? why ruin these two people’s lives to bring Jesus into the world!?

I think God wants to show us the answer to that question & so much more from Joseph’s dilemma than maybe you see at first glance. I told you I want to show you two things from observing Joseph right here: what it means to follow Jesus and then where the power to follow him comes from. First, **what Joseph’s decision shows you about following Jesus:**

1. Following Jesus means total trust and obedience¹

¹ While the content is different, I found this main point compelling from J.D. Greear’s sermon “Why following Jesus

The cross roads in front of Joseph is unmistakable. He's in an all or nothing moment with God. You cannot "sort of" trust God in this moment just like you cannot sort of jump out of an airplane. And Joseph in this moment had to trust God about something that seemed like a bad life move. Remember the safe, good-guy play is to divorce her quietly. But God's call to Joseph is to marry her. "Don't fear Joseph." If Joseph is going to obey God here it will require total trust in God's promise and plan. And Joseph does it. He was going one way – and then God spoke and everything changed. That's what total trust in God does. It changes the way you would otherwise respond to the circumstances of your life.

The bible is filled with moments like this. The disciples, as a matter of fact, are all going to face a moment where Jesus says put down what you are doing and follow me. You are either all in or you are out. And if you hedge your bet...if you put yourself half-way in with God, it won't work. Because you cannot respond to an all-or-nothing call with a half-way response.

Friends of our church serving in the Middle East. They have young children and are serving in a country that is oppressive to the gospel. They didn't go there because they like 120 degree summers. They went because Jesus says go tell this news to all nations...and they TRUST that if they obey, God will provide.

is Difficult: The Story of Joseph." The structure I took with teaching this passage is similar to Greear's approach.

As our staff has been debriefing the Jonah series we recently came out of...I can tell God really worked on some of you. Some of you are sensing a call to pick up your lives and move somewhere strategic for the mission of God. And in most cases your biggest down deep question is "what if this doesn't work?" Which is really "what if God doesn't come through?" Will you trust that the God who says "*how beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news*" will in fact provide for you if you obey him?

Maybe you are fighting for your marriage right now and you want to do things God's way but you just have so much pain and hurt. Listen the only way you will be able to forgive is if you TRUST God's forgiveness of you. Only then can you obey his call to forgive your spouse. And maybe you don't think you can trust him to fix your marriage because you just don't see how it's possible. You haven't fully surrendered to him yet.

A lot of you are giving sacrificially to Mercy Church. You don't do that because you need something to do with all that spare money. No, you give because you believe Jesus was raised from the dead, his promises are true, and his kingdom is real.

The way you can tell where your trust lies is by looking at your checking account. You may throw a little guilt money in the bucket on occasion to appease God. but will never give or serve in a sustained way because u aren't sure God will provide if u do. Giving is such a trust issue. Not just do you trust the church, but do you trust God!

This is what true Christianity looks like. Trusting, without reservation, the God who you cannot see.

2. You must be willing to give up everything

Everything is on the line here for Joseph. His relationships with his family, his reputation, his financial future. All of that goes bad if he marries Mary. See to fully follow God meant Both Joseph and Mary had to die to some dreams of their own didn't they. And that is the call to follow. Listen to how Jesus describes what it takes to follow him:

Matthew 16. [24] Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

Deny himself. That is the call if you are going to follow Jesus and before Jesus is even out of the womb his first two followers (mom & dad) are already having to deny themselves if they are going to follow Jesus. There is only one thing you get to keep with you if you follow Jesus. A cross. A torture device. Because one thing you are guaranteed in this life if you do follow Jesus... is suffering.

Listen I see this battle waging in some of you right now. God is calling you to take a step. A real genuine step of faith maybe for the first time and you are trying to figure out some kind of middle-of-the-road way where everybody wins and that isn't denying yourself! You've got to die to yourself, maybe to some dreams, if you are going to take that step. Maybe that is to cut off that relationship that is

not honoring to God. Maybe you've heard about our Christmas missions offering and for the first time you are thinking about being radically generous...but it's going to cost you. Maybe you are thinking about that co-worker you want to share the gospel with but you know it's going to change things. This is why the only way you can follow Jesus is by surrendering everything to him. He does not work as second place to ANYTHING.

In his book "Insanity of God" Nik Rypken records meeting Christians in countries where they are persecuted for following Christ. In Russia he met a man whose father was a pastor under communist rule and here is what he said "I remember the day like it was yesterday, Nik. My father put his arms around me and my sister and my brother and guided us into the kitchen to sit around the table where he could talk with us. My Mama was crying, so I knew that something was wrong. Papa didn't look at her because he was talking directly to us. he said '*Children, you know that I am the pastor of our church. That's what God has called me to do - to tell others about Him. I have learned that the communist authorities will come tomorrow to arrest me. They will put me in prison because they want me to stop preaching about Jesus. But I cannot stop doing that because I must obey God. I will miss you very much, but I will trust God to watch over you while I'm gone.*' He hugged each one of us. Then he said: '*All around this part of the country, the authorities are rounding up followers of Jesus and demanding that they deny their faith. Sometimes, when they refuse, the authorities will line up whole families*

and hang them by the neck until they are dead. I don't want that to happen to our family, so I am praying that once they put me in prison, they will leave you and your mother alone.' However, and here he paused and made eye contact with us 'If I am in prison and I hear that my wife and my children have been hung to death rather than deny Jesus, I will be the most proud man in that prison.'

Rypken said – when he finished his story I was stunned, I had never heard that kind of thing in my church growing up. I was sure that I had never been told a father should value his faith over his family.²

I know some of you are thinking...that Russian was extreme. Maybe to you and I who have been duped by creature comfort and skepticism. But to the bible, and to church history, this is pretty normative. Are you willing to surrender everything to the call of Christ on your life?

Ok I imagine for some of you coming in here who are new today this hasn't been the most Christmas-y message you've ever heard. You are ready to hark some herald angels singing! Where is the manger? I know. But I want you to grasp what true Christianity calls you to. Total trust, obedience, and giving up everything. Now I want to show you

where the strength to follow Jesus comes from:

² Nik Rypken *'Insanity of God'*

1. The fulfilled promise³

Ok like we said a minute ago the prophecy the angel references when talking to Joseph comes from Isaiah 7.14. Which at the time of it's writing was a bit of an odd prophecy. It was originally given to king Ahaz around 700 B.C. when Syria was on the verge of attacking Israel and wiping them out. Ahaz was a pretty wicked king. Ahaz was so twisted in fact that God at one point in this mess came to him and said just ask me for a sign that I am going to deliver you. And Ahaz...who had been doing some shady negotiations behind the scenes...has the nerve to say "I don't want a sign from God!" Probably because he knows that sign will put him under some obligation from God. And that's where Isaiah comes in and says TOO BAD. You don't dictate terms to God! So here's your sign...And the sign is Isaiah 7.14.

[14] Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

So what does this mean? Well the word virgin "alma" could mean a young woman of marriable age. So she could be a virgin at the time of the prophecy

³ I borrowed a portion of this section from Greear's "Joseph's Life" sermon because he holds a close view to my own of seeing Matthew's use of Isaiah 7.14 as a sort of second and more complete fulfillment of the original prophecy.

and it wouldn't really be a big deal at all for her to eventually bear a son. Makes sense. And someone in Ahaz's household did in fact have a son soon after. But that didn't really seem like that impressive of a "sign." And so the prophecy just kind of sat out there unresolved in Israel's history

UNTIL the angel shows up here and says that prophecy...THIS is what it was referring to. It's not just a young woman, it's a virgin who will conceive. Now that is an impressive sign! This is the complete fulfillment of the original prophecy. The original prophecy was about salvation from one invading army. The final fulfillment is about salvation from our ultimate enemy: sin and death.

Here's why this matters. Joseph in this moment hears that God is keeping a really old promise. Which like a shot right to the heart reminds Joseph that God is faithful to keep his promises. Get that? God is reminding Joseph that he keeps his promises. Just like he kept his promise to this point, he will keep them from here.

THAT is what gave Joseph the strength to obey God's outrageous life altering call on his life. Joseph knew God was faithful to keep his promises and that is why he could trust him when he didn't understand him. You get that because that is the whole enchilada when it comes to following Christ.

And that is what will give you the strength to finally break free from casual Christianity and take bold steps of obedience to God. When you see that God is faithful, and has always been faithful, to do what he says he's going to do...that is what gives you the power to trust him.

To which you might say...yes if I could just see a sign then yeah I'd believe. And God says here it is! The virgin has conceived! That's your sign. So many people look at their circumstances and determine whether or not God is real based on what is happening in their life. But that is a pretty poor way to determine what God is like isn't it? One week you pass an exam, get a promotion, and find out you are getting more money than expected back on your taxes. God is good. Next week you get your new health insurance premium for 2017 and your car breaks down. Is there a God?

Or maybe on a more serious note you discover the cancer is back. Or a loved one dies unexpectedly. Or you are betrayed by someone close to you. Where does the power to follow God come from in hard times? Your trust in God doesn't come from how comfortable your circumstances are but from the promises he's fulfilled for you. The Virgin Conceived & the messiah resurrected! Where is God? Right where you need him most. Faithful to his promise to

rescue you from sin and never abandon you.

2. The Names of Jesus

The angel gives Jesus two names pretty quickly which is a little odd. But the more I thought about it the more awesome it became. These two names represent how God relates to us and this is where our power to trust him comes from. The first is from verse 21 “you shall call his name Jesus for he will save his people from their sins.”

The name Jesus in Hebrew means “God saves.” This is what Jesus does. He saves.

The name Immanuel as Matthew told us means “God with us.” this is who Jesus is.

This is the secret. You know the thing that makes Christmas so remarkable for Christians is we celebrate one of the most foundational doctrines to our faith: That Jesus was born both 100% man and 100% God at the same time. Why a virgin birth?

- Well he had to be 100% man to be an acceptable representative of mankind on the cross. Human sin had to be paid for in human blood because the wages of sin is death. So Jesus had to be human to get up on the cross as a substitute for our sin.
- But at the same time he had to be fully God because only God can save. We saw that in Jonah. Jonah 2.9 salvation belongs to the Lord and no one else. God is the only one capable of saving. On top of that, the only way the payment could be a substitute is if

Christ was sinless. Because if he sinned well then he’d need to pay for his own sins. And only God is perfect.

In the virgin birth God came to be with us to save us. And then remember what we said earlier...he promised to always remain with us. And he left behind the Holy Spirit who he said would remain not just with us but in us.

This is I believe the part so many Christians don’t fully experience. I know I often live as if this isn’t true. God himself has come down and is walking with you. He’s here! And his promise to Christians is that he will remain with you until you meet him in heaven one day.

Listen to me: You ask how could Joseph take such a radical step of obedience? And the reality is: He knew God was faithful and that he was WITH him and... the coolest thing... “The secret is that everything that God is asking Joseph and Mary to do he will do, in a much greater sense, for them.

- Like Mary and Joseph, Jesus (God in the flesh) would be misunderstood and falsely accused.
- The religious establishment would despise and condemn him.
- Like Mary, Jesus would carry about in his body a death sentence from being falsely accused, except he actually would die in shame, bearing the curse for someone else.

- And self-denial—he would take upon his back a bloody cross and open up his hands to have nails driven into them so that we could be saved.
- He took our sin; bore our shame. *Surely he has borne our grief and carried our sorrows; yet we considered him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.*
- Essentially Joseph is being invited to share in the sufferings of Jesus.
- Everything that Jesus experienced on earth you have to be willing to experience if you are to be his follower and the only way to have the strength to do that is to see that Jesus did it for you and now you can do with him."⁴

Before we can grasp the full meaning of the Resurrection, we first have to witness or experience crucifixion. If we spend our lives so afraid of suffering, so averse to sacrifice, that we avoid even the risk of persecution or crucifixion, then we might never discover the true wonder, joy and power of a resurrection faith. Ironically, avoiding suffering could be the very thing that prevents us from partnering deeply with the Risen Jesus.⁵

The faithfulness of God and the nearness of God overcame the doubt Joseph faced. Do you see what Joseph saw? The only way you will be able to sacrifice everything for Jesus

⁴ From Greear "Joseph's Life" sermon. Great connection between Joseph/Mary & the life of Jesus.

⁵ Rypken, *'Insanity of God'*

and put him first is if he is your source of Joy. So the great news to you is that if you are on the fence, kind of half-way in with Jesus...you can stop trying harder to follow Jesus. You have to dive deeper into the joy of the gospel. Is your joy there? He is the joy you've been looking for.

Listen, Joseph could have chosen to walk away from all this right? What would have happened? He probably would have gotten that nice wedding with some other girl. Probably had a good carpentry business. Maybe even land an HGTV show one day. But the problem is...he would have missed out on JESUS!

You can choose to do things your way. God says forgive and you can say no. God says give your time to serve others and you can say no. God says sacrifice and you say no. The problem is in doing so you may just miss out on Jesus! Don't miss the joy of Jesus.

Closing: Treasure hidden in a field. Jesus will cost you everything. And prove to bring your life more joy than anything else. Will you jump?