

A Not-So-Ideal Situation

What's up everyone. If I haven't met you yet, my name is Marcus and I'm one of the pastors here. If you have your bibles, go ahead and open with me to Matthew 1. If you don't have a bible, there should be some underneath the seat in front of you (sorry front row). We've been in a series for a few weeks now on the Christmas story. And we've been jumping back and forth between the gospels of Matthew and Luke, looking at the Christmas story from a number of angles. And really, we've been finding out that there's more going on with the Christmas story than we probably what we use to remember as kids.

And this week, we're gonna spend some time looking at Joseph, Jesus' dad. Or step-dad. Or adoptive dad? He's definitely one of them. Anywho, we're gonna look at what happens when Joseph receives the somewhat life-altering news that his wife-to-be is pregnant with Jesus. But before we do all of that, I usually start off sermons this way and wanted to make sure I said this. If at all during the sermon you feel the Spirit moving, or if you hear something that just really resonates with you, be encouraged to say amen. And here's why I say that, the reason we say amen is to one agree with what the Spirit is saying and also to help those who don't follow after Jesus to know, hey what was said was some good truth to listen to. So follower of Jesus in the room be encouraged this morning to say a few amens.

Alright, so let's pick it up in Matthew 1, v. 18:

[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.

Now just to catch you up, Matthew says at this point, Mary has been told that she is going to give birth to a son, but that this child won't be her fiance's Joseph's baby, it will actually be from the Holy Spirit. And if that sounds weird to you, it also sounded weird to them. And just to make things a little more complicated, she is not even married to Joseph yet. It says here that Mary is only "betrothed" to Joseph. Now that's probably a weird word to most of us. **A betrothal was kind of like an engagement, but it was legally binding.** To break off a betrothal required a legal divorce, not just a parting of ways and an awkward conversation about who gets to keep the ring. During the betrothal, the man and woman were legally married but couldn't consummate the marriage yet.

So a lot of things happen during a betrothal, but the main thing that happens was that **the husband and wife-to-be were observed for their purity**. And in Mary's case, it very much looked like she was not pure? And even though we know she was, people back in the day didn't read this story like you and I have, so understanding they were not.

So I tell you all that to say, imagine this scenario with me from Joseph's perspective. You are engaged to be married in this hyper-conservative culture. Your fiancée, whom you love, comes up to you during the engagement and says "So, I'm going to need to sit you down for this one, are you sitting?" "I'm pregnant." Cue Joseph's face. If you're Joseph you're thinking well I know it's not mine. So you say very calmly "ok, by who?" and she says well, this is awkward, you're still sitting down right?, by the Holy Spirit." Now, if you're Joseph, how do you think that's gonna fly with you? To you, this is the worst playing of the God card in the history of God cards, right?!? Matter fact, it was probably the very first God card ever played. So now, you're not only upset because of the horrible situation, you're upset because apparently Mary couldn't come up with a better lie. If you're Joseph, you're probably thinking "cool, cool, cool, cool, cool, so when can I meet this "Holy Spirit? I'd love to have a very small but intense chat with him."

So alright, verse 19,

[19] And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.

So Joseph does what any dude in this day would have done: he makes plans to break off the betrothal. The passage says Joseph "resolved to divorce her quietly." Because if they continued their engagement, anyone and everyone would believe that either 1) Mary had been unfaithful to Joseph, or 2) that she and Joseph had been sneaking around with each other. **Either way, staying with Mary would've been a bad idea.** It would've been him willingly embracing unnecessary shame, scorn, and even outright hate from the people around them. Matthew tells us that Joseph was a righteous man: he was committed to following the law of divorcing an unfaithful spouse—but doing so in the most selfless and most compassionate way possible.

Well, until this happens in v. 20:

[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.*

So God sends an angel in a dream to tell Joseph, I know what you’re thinking, but I’m gonna need you to not divorce Mary. And then he proceeds to tell him that she is pregnant via the Holy Spirit. Which I’m sure he heard from somewhere, who’s to say. he had already heard from Mary, Joking, he totally heard that from Mary.

Now I want us to slow down here for a bit because I don’t want you to miss what is going on. At this point in the story, God appears to Joseph, who from all appearances is a respectable, upright, stand-up guy. The Bible say he was a righteous man. And not only does God *introduce difficulty into* Joseph’s life in the form of an unexpected son, but then he sends an angel to encourage Joseph to walk directly *into* the difficulty by marrying Mary and raising Jesus as his own. **In other words, God leads Joseph straight into difficulty, not out of it. Let me say that one more time for the people in the back.**

I hear people often say that following Jesus is “the best way to live.” That it’s the “fulfilled life,” that it’s “#blessed,” and that “thebestisyettocome.” But the truth of those statements—that following Jesus is the “best way to live”—I think, depends *entirely* on how you define the word *best*. If what you mean by that is that following Jesus is the best because it’s how we were *intended to live all along*, then I’m all for it. But if what you mean by *best* is that following Jesus will give you—as one author put it—your “best life now”—then I would have to disagree with you fam. If you mean that following Jesus guarantees that life will go well for you—that following Jesus will somehow secure material blessing or financial security and help you win friends and influence people, you’re in for an unpleasant surprise. Because the bible does not teach that at all. I mean, our boy Joseph certainly would take issue with that understanding of following Jesus, right? In fact, **in this story, Joseph’s life gets worse, not better.**

And sometimes that doesn’t get talked about enough. Hear me say this fam, **sometimes, doing what God says makes life harder, not easier.** That following Jesus brings with it not just gain, but loss. In fact, in this passage, we see **two specific types of loss** Joseph experiences because he does what God says to do.

1. Loss of reputation.

First, Joseph obeying what God says to do through the angel ensures that for at least the next few years, **people will make fun of him as the guy who married that**

pregnant girl. And I don't mean some mean tweets or veiled Facebook messages right? These were way worse and in person. To everyone watching this story unfold, Joseph was either a complete liar and was actually the one to get Mary pregnant which again was seen as not a good look; or a complete fool for staying with Mary who was pregnant by someone else. Just think about the loss of reputation and more this would have been for him in a society like this one.

But a loss of reputation for doing what God says isn't exclusive to Joseph. **Scripture makes it clear that anybody who decides to follow Jesus will experience it.** Take a look at just a few of the ways the bible puts it:

...If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you....

– John 15:20

And you will be hated by all for my name's sake...

– Mark 13:13

Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

– 2 Timothy 3:12

See, on a number of occasions, the bible tells us “if you want to follow Jesus, your reputation *will* be on the line. Guaranteed.” **Difficulty will come, not just in general, because of the brokenness of the world—but directly as a result of your decision to follow Jesus.**

Now I will say this, the *type* of adversity we face in 21st century America is often a little different than what followers of Jesus in the Bible experienced. For most of us, we probably haven't experienced beatings or being thrown in jail because of what we believe about God. Usually in our culture here in America, it's more subtle. It's more like a subtle ridicule when you don't decide to go out and get wasted on the weekends with everybody else. It's just a little snicker or slight from people when you indicate you only plan to sleep with someone once you're married to them.

And for many of us, it's just enough of that subtle pressure to keep that whole *faith* thing to yourself right. To not bring up Jesus or church in conversation so we won't seem “preachy” or make people around us feel uncomfortable. I get that. I remember when I finally became a pastor, and I was sitting at my desk designing something, and my coworker stopped by and mentioned he saw on Facebook that I had

been ordained as a pastor. I nodded and smiled and also became keenly aware of just how loud I felt he was talking. And I thought, man, did anyone else hear that? Because in my head, I thought now everyone will treat me differently and won't want to talk to me about real stuff because they know that I follow Jesus. Because in my eyes, as soon as people find out, they will think oh he's a pastor; he's "too holy;" I can't talk to him about anything. And that right there is what I'm talking about right. The subtle pressure to keep the whole faith thing to yourself.

The reality is that with every day that goes by, our culture becomes less and less okay with any expression of faith in the public square. Nobody just comes out and says "don't be a follower of Jesus"—they just say "sure, you can follow Jesus....just keep it to yourself." You know it's the separation between church and everyone else. "Sure, what you believe about God and what you do on Sundays is none of my business, but just don't let any of that stuff affect the way you lead at work, or conduct business, or interact with your classmates or coworkers." It's a real thing.

And hear me say, just because this kind of pressure is more subtle doesn't make it less real. **If you are following Jesus, there will be moments when you will feel like the odd one out.** When you get painted by others as a prude. When people think you're judging them, just because you're not participating in the things they're participating in. **You will experience, in some way, a loss of reputation.**

And in those moments, I'll go ahead and let you know, you will be tempted to respond in one of two sinful ways. The first is by **rejecting Jesus**. For some, the pressure of being disapproved of is simply too much to handle. They would rather be liked by people than be identified as a follower of Jesus and so they eventually just walk away from Jesus altogether.

But to be honest, the more common response to ridicule is **reinventing Jesus**. Especially here in the South, a lot of people are a little too nervous to just outright give up on Jesus—they've got too much history, too much mileage, they've read Revelation. So instead, here's how we do it: when we talk about Jesus, instead of him being someone who wants to save us from sin and help us repent of sin, he just becomes a spiritual guide that wants to help us live a better, more fulfilled life. Instead of Jesus being a guy who says certain things are wrong, he becomes a guy who's really just about loving people and not judging people. Instead of Jesus being a guy who calls us to deny ourselves, pick up our cross and follow him, he becomes a guy who just wants us

to do what makes us happy. **In a dozen little ways, we just reinvent Jesus, modify him a little so he's more palatable to us and to the people around us.**

But **when we reinvent Jesus, it's not really Jesus we're following, it's ourselves.** Mark Twain said it well when he wrote that "*God created man in his own image and man, being a gentleman, returned the favor.*" I can't help but think of how many people, especially in America, **claim to worship God when they're really just worshiping a modified version of themselves.** And you know what, here's a good way to find out if you're doing that: "If you've never had anybody look at you weird, or be a little awkward around you or poke fun at you a little because they knew you were a follower of Jesus, it's worth asking if you've just reinvented Jesus into something that doesn't offend anybody."

Now, just because of where we're at culturally, I do need to give a disclaimer here: **not everything that doesn't exclusively cater to Christians is persecution.** For example, people disliking the guy who yell-preaches at people in Market Square is not him being persecuted. He's experiencing the natural consequences of being a jerk. Starbucks not putting "Merry Christmas" on their coffee cups is not persecution. That's a very normal, understandable business decision from a worldly perspective. People not wanting to hang out with you because you're very self-righteous and judgmental towards them is not persecution. Not everything negative towards Christians is persecution. But some things are.

And Joseph's obedience to God meant persecution—it meant a loss of reputation. And it also meant...

2. Loss of control.

For Joseph, **doing what God told him to do meant a complete loss of control over what he thought his life would be like.** By saying "yes" to staying with Mary, he was yielding control over the way he saw his life going. I mean think about it. Joseph, a blue-collar, working-class guy, probably saw himself getting married, living a quiet life on the Galilean hillside, eventually having kids of his own, maybe getting a dog, you know, kind of like his own version of *The Little House on the Prairie*. Then, out of nowhere, his plans must change. Now, the woman he's engaged to is already pregnant with a child that isn't his, and God's instructions mean he is going to be the center of ridicule and gossip in a conservative town for the foreseeable future. Can you imagine a more dramatic turn of events? **Can you imagine how utterly out-of-control this dream would've left Joseph feeling?**

We even see this in one of the details in the passage. Pick it up where we left off, v. 21:

[21] She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” [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).

In the first century, **naming your child was a big deal. It was a sign of your authority and control over your family.** And it was the *father’s* responsibility to *name* the child. But by the angel *telling* Joseph what this child’s name will be, he is communicating to Joseph that even *that* control won’t belong to him at all. It’s another way of saying that his life will not play out the way he thought it would. **Joseph would no longer get to decide when they had kids, if they had kids, who that kid would be, what he or she would do. All of that was stripped away in an instant when the angel said “and you shall call his name Jesus.”**

In my experience, one of the hardest things for people to accept when it comes to following Jesus is the loss of control it entails. The fact that following Jesus means that your life might not go like you thought it would. The reality that now God ultimately gets to “name” what happens next in our lives, rather than us, can be unnerving.

And if that doesn’t sound familiar to you, it might be because we love to try and convince ourselves that following Jesus doesn’t actually work that way. **Some people are under the impression that Jesus, or Christianity, is just something you sorta add to your life.** People will say “I feel like I have everything, what I’m missing is something spiritual.” If I could just add Jesus to my mostly-complete life, I’d be good to go. See, here’s the thing, I think if we were completely honest with ourselves, **that’s what we really want right: a controllable god.** A god we can just add to our already fulfilling lives, who we can co-opt to help us get what we already want.

But if the story of Joseph could speak to that, it says something very different. **There was no bargaining in this story.** He did not get to say “sure God, I will still marry this girl and help raise this kid, as long as I get to name the kid what I want and as long as I get to raise him to be the type of kid *I want him* to be.” That’s not the deal that was offered to Joseph. **Jesus—the real Jesus—is not someone you can just add to your life. He often turns your life on its head.**

And here's the crazy thing: **even knowing that, Joseph chooses to go through with it.** Look at v. 24 with me:

[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.

Again, just speaking from a purely logical standpoint, this is certifiably crazy. Here is a man who is permitted (even encouraged) to divorce his wife when finding out she's pregnant with a child who isn't his. That man, upon hearing from an angel in a dream, decides to instead embrace a loss of reputation, a loss of control over his life, marry this woman anyway, and raise this child with her as his own. That's insane. ***People don't do stuff like that.***

And yet, throughout the history of the world, followers of Jesus have done exactly that. They've endured the loss of reputation, the loss of popularity, given up control of their life, they've uprooted their lives and moved to new locations, they've faced ridicule, persecution, even death—all because they want to follow Jesus.

I'll give you some examples:

- Let's start with one we remember this time of year. St. Nicholas, aka who Santa Claus is based, was a follower of Jesus and a bishop in the third century. His parents died when he was a teeneager, and left him a ton of money. Guided by Jesus' instructions in the gospels to "sell all your possessions and give to the poor," best we can tell, he kept almost none of the inheritance, but instead used it all to care for children and the poor. Then under a Roman emperor who persecuted Christians, St. Nicholas was thrown in prison because of his obedience to Jesus. **St. Nicholas lost a lot of things, all as a result of doing what God told him to do.**
- In a story that some of you may know about, a husband and wife named Jim and Elisabeth Eliot lived among Indian tribes as missionaries. One day, Jim went into a nearby tribe to tell them about Jesus, and was killed almost immediately by them. Shortly after, Elisabeth decided to learn the language of the tribe that murdered her husband so that she and her young daughter could go and live among them. **Jim and Elisabeth Eliot lost a lot of things, all as a result of them doing what God told them to do.**

And I could sit here and tell you story after story just like those, of followers of Jesus that have been willing to lose whatever they need to lose to follow after Jesus. **Now, when we hear stories like that, we could just assume that those people are crazy.** That they have some sort of weird desire to make their life difficult when it doesn't have to be. That could be the case. Or we could assume that they have all discovered something that many people haven't. If we see in other people a joyful desire that we see in almost no one else, **is it not worth asking if they've figured out something other people haven't?**

Think about it like this: let's say you live in a house that's worth \$150,000. And then imagine someone shows up at the doorstep of your house tomorrow, and says "I'd like to offer you \$1 million right now for your house and the lot it sits on." Now as excited as you would be about that transaction, wouldn't you kind of want to ask "why?" Wouldn't you be at least the slightest bit skeptical? For someone to give you such an unreasonably high price for something you own would make me want to go "what do you know about my property that I *don't* know?" "What am I not aware of that makes this a reasonable decision for you?"

So let me ask you this: if throughout history we see generation after generation of followers of Jesus saying "it's worth it to me to lose all that—to lose most *anything* to do what God tells me to do," **shouldn't we be assume that they've discovered something that makes it worthwhile?** And on the flipside, **if we see in ourselves *no desire to lose our reputation, to lose control of our life—no desire to yield our lives to Jesus at all—would it not also be reasonable to assume that maybe we haven't found what they've found?*** Jesus says it this way: "*The kingdom of God is like a treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.*" Jesus says that that's exactly the type of response the gospel elicits in people.

See my fear is that we would hear stories like that of St. Nicholas and like that of the Eliots and go "wow, that's really cool that they did that." And at the same time think, "I really hope I don't have to make a choice like that someday." But here's the thing: ***you are faced with a choice like that.*** Sure it may not look as *severe*, but it's the same choice.

You're gonna face the choice of either joining in on the office gossip, or not joining in and risk people thinking you're a little weird because you don't. You're gonna face the choice of sleeping with the person you're dating with or deciding not to, and looking

old-fashioned or behind the times because of it. You're gonna face the choice of trying to keep your kid from ever facing anything difficult or adverse—or giving them a front row seat to the not-so-glamorous life of a mom or dad who follow after Jesus. It's the same choice even though it may appear a little different. So the question is, **is the treasure in the field worth losing whatever it takes to gain it?** Following Jesus will include loss, and you will have to decide if that loss is worth it to you personally, or not. That's what the decision to follow Jesus looks like. And that's the decision that Joseph made.

But here's the part you absolutely cannot miss. Band you can come on up. Here's the part that you cannot miss. **For all that Joseph lost, he gained Jesus.** Though he lost nearly everything, he gained God himself. In fact, it tells us that's literally what the name Immanuel means, *God with us*. In his loss of reputation and loss of control, God was *with* Joseph. And that's an incredible trade. To trade human approval for the very presence of God? To trade our short-sighted plans for our life for God's perfect plans for our life?

This is the same idea that Paul tries to get across in Philippians 3:

*[8] Indeed, I count **everything** as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of **all things** [somebody say **all things**] and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ...*

In other words, when Paul considers what it means practically to know Jesus himself, he considers *anything* he has to lose completely worth it. A little ridicule from people at work? Nothing. A little social exclusion from time to time? Who cares. A little awkwardness when you bring up Jesus with someone in conversation and they think it's weird? What does that matter. **Paul says whatever I have to lose, to gain Jesus!? Oh it's worth it.**

Now maybe to you, that sounds unachievable. Like you hear that and go "that sounds awesome, but I'm nowhere close to thinking about it that way." Well let's check out what Paul says a little later in v. 12:

[12] Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

Paul says ‘hey, don’t get it twisted—I’m not perfect in this, I don’t think this way nearly as much as I know I should. But here’s what I do: I press on to make it my own, because here’s why: *Jesus has made me his own.*’

In other words, because I know for a fact that Jesus suffered the loss of all things for me, I want to fight for the willingness to do the same. Not out of guilt, not out of some sort of martyr complex, but as a *natural response*. As a response to what Jesus did for me. Hebrews 12 says it like this that “for the *joy set before him*, Jesus endured the cross, scorning its shame.” **Jesus lovingly endured loss for us, now we get to follow after him in doing the same.** Let us pray.

Ministry Time Transition

So during the next few songs, we want to give the Holy Spirit some space to work in and through us. If you’re here this morning and you feel like God is stirring something in you—maybe in response to the teaching, maybe completely independently from the teaching—we want to give you some time to respond to that before we leave today.

Now, that may look like a number of different things:

- Maybe it looks like just sitting or staying put while you wrestle through whatever it is, process it with God.
- Maybe you need help from someone else discerning *what exactly* God is stirring in you, and you want to ask someone in your LifeGroup or someone you came with for help processing and speaking into what all it is exactly.
- Maybe you’re realizing that there is conflict or tension or awkwardness between you and somebody else in our church family, and you need to go talk through it with them in order to resolve it.
- Maybe you’ve been hiding a struggle or a sin and you want to talk to somebody you know to just get it out into the open, once and for all.
- Maybe you’re hurting or suffering, and you want to have someone pray over you and pray for your healing, or your endurance in the midst of it.
- Or, maybe you’re just overcome right now with the love of the Father for you, and you just feel compelled to stay right where you’re at and singing to celebrate and meditate on that reality.

Whatever it is, we want to give you and the Holy Spirit space for all that to happen. Just know **you’re “allowed” to do way more in the rest of the Gathering than just sing.**

Use this time to let the Holy Spirit work in and among us. There's no one right thing to do during these next few songs, as long as you are listening for and responding to what God is doing in you. This is what true worship is, so we want to allow space for it all.

The communion tables are in the back—if you're a follower of Jesus, you're invited to participate in that as a reminder of the gospel: that Jesus, through his life, death and resurrection, has reconciled you to himself and to others.