

What Joseph Lost (and We Will Too)

Good to see you guys. If you have your bibles, go ahead and open with me to **Matthew 1**. 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, and looking at the Christmas story from a number of angles. And really, we've been discovering that there's more going on with the Christmas story than we often remember from the Christmas pageants and nativity scenes.

This week, we're gonna spend some time looking at **Joseph, Jesus' dad**. Or step-dad. Or adoptive dad? There's not really a naming protocol on what to call the father figure when the Father of the child is God, so we'll just go with "step dad." So we're gonna look at what happens when Joseph receives the somewhat life-altering news that his wife-to-be is pregnant with Jesus.

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.

So just to catch you up on the story, Matthew says at this point, Mary, the mother of Jesus, has been told that she is going to give birth to a son, but that this child won't be Joseph's child, it will be from the Holy Spirit. And we talked last week about how odd and unbelievable that is for Mary. But what complicates things even further is that at this point, she is not even married to her husband Joseph yet. It says here that Mary is only **"betrothed"** to Joseph. 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. Which is not most people's preferred way to be married.

A lot of things happened during this betrothal, but one of the primary things that happened was that **the wife-to-be was observed for her purity**. I know that sounds sort of chauvinistic and barbaric to us, but in a hyper-conservative culture like this one, people wanted to be sure that the wife was chaste leading up to her wedding night. If it was discovered somehow that she *wasn't*, the groom would have ample cause to "divorce" her, and would be motivated to do so for a number of logistical reasons. To name just one one, all the shame and condemnation that would be heaped on him if he married a woman who was known to not be pure.

I tell you all of that so that you can imagine this scenario with me from Joseph's perspective. You are engaged to be married in a hyper-conservative culture like this one. Your fiancée, whom you love, comes up to you during the engagement and says "I'm pregnant," but you know for a fact it's not yours. So you say "by who?" and she says (wait for it) "the Holy Spirit." How's that gonna go over with you? To you, this is the worst playing of the God card in the history of the world. So now, you're not only upset because of the horrible situation, you're upset because apparently she didn't even think it was worth coming up with a *good lie* to explain the situation. You've gotta think Joseph is thinking "oh yeah, what's Holy Spirit's address? I'd like to go have a chat with him."

So Joseph does what many people would do in this kind of scenario: **he makes plans to break off** the betrothal. Look at v. 19:

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

Now, keep in mind, by all appearances this would've been the expected thing to do. **If they continued** their betrothal, anyone and everyone would believe that either A) Mary had been unfaithful to Joseph, or B) that she and Joseph had been sneaking around with each other. **Either way, in a morally conservative culture, 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. So Joseph, wanting to make a rational decision, but also wanting to show compassion towards Mary, decides to break off the betrothal.

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 not to divorce** her. Instead, he says to stay *with* her, because she is pregnant via the Holy Spirit. Which he probably had already heard, but when the information coming from an angel in a dream, I guess it seems a little more credible. **The angel tells him to proceed as previously planned, take Mary as his wife, and raise this sudden unexpected child as his own.**

Now I want us to slow down here for a bit because I **don't want you to miss what is going on here.** At this point in the story, God appears to a man who from all appearances is a respectable, upright, stand-up guy. And not only does God introduce difficulty *into* Joseph's life in the form of an unexpected son, but then sends an angel to encourage Joseph to walk directly *into* the difficulty caused by staying with his unwed, pregnant fiancée. **In other words, God leads Joseph straight into difficulty, not out of it.**

I hear people often say that following Jesus is **"the best way to live."** It's the "fulfilled life," it's the "#blessed," "#thebestisyettocome." But the truth of that statement—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 totally agree—it is the best way to live. But if what you mean by *best* is that following Jesus will give you—as one "Christian" author put it—your "best life now"—I disagree in the strongest sense of the word. If you mean that following Jesus guarantees that life will go well for you—that following Jesus will secure material blessing and 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. In fact, **in this story, from that perspective, Joseph's life gets worse, not better.**

And sometimes that **doesn't get talked about enough.** The reality that **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 ridicule him as the guy who married that pregnant girl**. To everyone watching this story unfold, Joseph was either a complete liar or a complete fool for staying with Mary. Just think about the loss of reputation that would've carried with it 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

On a number of occasions, the bible tells us “if you want to follow Jesus, your reputation *will be* negatively affected. Guaranteed.” **Difficulty will come, not just in general, because of the brokenness of the world—but directly resulting from your decision to follow Jesus.**

Now **admittedly, 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 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 relational distance when you don't talk about sleeping with people you're not married to.

And for many of us, it's just the subtle pressure to keep that whole *faith thing to yourself*. It's just an inherent aversion to ever bringing up Jesus or church in conversation for fear of seeming “preachy” or making people around us uncomfortable. I get that. The other day, we had our neighbors over for dinner and a couple of the guys in my LifeGroup started talking about how I was a pastor. My immediate response was “Welp this is the first and last time my neighbors will want to hang out with me.”

The reality is 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.” “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, or conduct business, or interact with people.”

But just because this kind of pressure is more subtle doesn't make it less real. **If you are following Jesus, there will come moments when you 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, you will often be tempted to **respond in one of two 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 with 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 with religion or with the Church to feel comfortable doing that. So instead, they will just reinvent Jesus. **A lot of you have probably heard the true story about Thomas Jefferson, one of the founding fathers of our country who was known to rip out the pages of the bible that he didn't like or agree with. Now a lot of us hear that and think "how ridiculous—who does that?" But the reality is that we all have a tendency to do that. Thomas Jefferson was just more honest about it. He at least was consistent: if he was going to worship a Jesus different than the one in the bible, he was at least gonna cut those parts out of his bible.** Sometimes you and I just invent our own Jesus, and *pretend* that those other parts aren't in the bible.

So, here's how we do it: **in how we talk about Jesus**, instead of him being someone who wants to save you from sin and help you repent of sin, he just becomes a spiritual guide that wants to help you 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 other people.**

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 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 awkward around you, or poke fun at you a little, because of something you say or do as a follower of Jesus. **If you've never had anyone react adversely to you because of what you believe about God, it would seem that there's a very good chance that you've just reinvented him in a way that doesn't bother 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, Starbucks not putting "Merry Christmas" on their coffee cups is not persecution. That's a very normal, understandable business decision. People disliking the guy who yell-preaches at people in Market Square is not being persecuted. He's experiencing the natural consequences of being a jerk. People not wanting to hang out with you because you're very self-righteous and mean 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...

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.** I mean think about it. Joseph, a blue-collar, working-class guy, probably saw himself getting married, living a difficult-but-quiet life in the Galilean hillside, eventually having kids of his own, but overall living a very socially-acceptable, uneventful life. Then, out of nowhere, his plans 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 or 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, it was the woman's job to birth the child—shocking, I know—but the father's responsibility to *name* the child (If you ask me, the dads got off easy on that one). In this culture, **naming your child was a sign of your authority and control over your family.** But by the angel telling Joseph what this child's name will be, he is communicating to Joseph that that control won't be his to have at all. It's a 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, how they had kids, who that kid would be, what he 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 life, rather than us.

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 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. Here's how author Skye Jethani puts it:

My secret is that I want to be relevant and popular. I want my desires fulfilled and pain minimized. I want a manageable relationship with an institution rather than messy relationships with real people. I want to be transformed into the image of Christ by showing up at entertaining events rather than through the hard work of discipline. I want to wear my faith on my sleeve and not look at the darkness in my heart. And above all, I want a controllable god. I want a divine commodity to do my will on earth as well as in heaven.

I personally don't really like that quote because of how convicting it is to me. I think if we were completely honest with ourselves, **that's what we want: 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 say 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 add to your life. He 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.

Now, just speaking from a purely logical standpoint, this is certifiably crazy. Here is a man in a hyper-conservative society, 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.**

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. Followers of Jesus throughout history have done exactly that.

I'll give you **some examples:**

- Let's start with one we remember this time of year. **St. Nicholas**, the real person on which 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 Jesus. **Now, when we hear stories like that, we**

could just assume that those people are crazy. That they have some sort of masochistic, 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 people 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 inclination* 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. I'm so glad I'll never be faced with a choice like that." 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 follows Jesus. It's the same choice even though it may appear a little different: **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.** **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 my short-sighted plans for my life for God's perfect plans for my life? Now that trade starts to make all the sense in the world.

This is the same idea that Paul was trying 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** 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!?* Worth it. Has to be 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.” But look at this—Paul’s not just up there, spiritual cape waving in the wind. **He’s really honest about where he’s at with this,** just a few verses 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 me wrong**—I’m not there all the time. 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 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’s pray.

Look at how Hebrews 12 puts it:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,

In other words, since we have had so many people go before us who have endured the loss of many things to do what God asked them to do...

let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us

In light of that, let us do the same thing, let us lay aside every sin, but also any weight, meaning anything that is an obstacle to us loving Jesus and following after him. And here's what makes it worth it:

looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

The way we endure the loss of all things to follow Jesus is by keeping our eyes on Jesus himself, who did that very thing. For the joy set before him, he endured the cross, the shameful loss of reputation, the complete yielding of control, so that we could do the same. Jesus is our example, our motivation, and our purpose in doing all of it.

And with that motivation, let us be able to endure loss as well, for the sake of following Jesus.

My guess is that tomorrow, God's not gonna call you to sell or give up everything you own in order to follow Jesus. But can I tell you what Jesus probably *is* going to happen? At some point this week, some of you *are* gonna have the opportunity to join in on the gossip and complaining about the person at work that everybody hates. And to not participate in it is gonna mean that your reputation might take a little hit—people are gonna see you a little less as 'one of them' if you don't participate. If I had to guess, at some point this week, somebody in your life or LifeGroup is gonna need something. And to help, you're gonna have to let loose of control over the plans you had for that day or that evening.

So a fair question to ask is *why*? Why would someone do this? If following Jesus doesn't make life better or easier, and if it means being ridiculed and excluded and yielding complete control to someone else, why does anyone ever do it? I mean that's not the most appealing sales pitch for a religion, right? "Follow Jesus! If you do, people won't like you and your life won't turn out anything like you thought it would! Who wants to sign up?" At times, it really feels like Jesus could use a P.R. manager for his movement. Who volunteers for that? If you have a life coach and you decide to start following Jesus, they're gonna be telling you're making a huge mistake. Because on the surface, that looks like a really silly trade. In fact, it looks certifiably insane.

Following Jesus will inevitably lead to all kinds of loss. So why does anyone ever do it?

Hold that thought. Look with me at Matthew 13:44—we'll put it on the screen:

The kingdom of heaven is like 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.

So Jesus tells this story about a guy who finds a treasure in a field. Once he realizes what he's found, he covers it back up, and then goes and sells all he has so that he has enough money to buy that field. Now on the surface, who sells all they have to buy a field? I mean I'm a big fan of acreage, but I'm not gonna sell my house, my car, all of my possessions, I'm not gonna lose everything I own so that I can gain a field and become field-poor. Sell *everything you have for a piece of land*?? That would've looked certifiably crazy from the outside looking in. And it is, *unless* whatever is in that field is worth infinitely more than anything you have to sell to get it. And that's exactly the point of the parable. The man who finds that treasure is so certain that the treasure is worth that much, that he "in joy" goes and empties himself of everything he has to obtain it. On the outside it would've looked like the craziest decision he'd ever made. But in reality, it was actually the *best decision* he'd ever made.

Now you could call that some sort of glorious delusion. All those people might be doing that because they are deceived and think they're somehow earning God's favor by doing it. And to be fair, some of them might be doing it with that kind of wrong motivation. Or you could assume that those people have found a treasure worth giving all of that up for. And that they, in their joy, are giving up whatever they need to give up to gain that treasure.

It might be that they've given up the false comfort and security that money and possessions offers and traded it for the comfort and security that is yours no matter how much stuff or money you have. It might be that they've given up the false purpose and identity that comes from climbing the corporate ladder and traded it for the purpose and identity that come from being who you were made to be. It could be that they've given up the momentary thrill of a dozen little one night stands and traded it for the infinite joy of leveraging a life of singleness for the good of the kingdom of God.

It could be that they're deceived, or it could be that they've found something so much better than anything they've had to give up. That they've gained so much more than they've ever had to lose. That's what following Jesus is all about...not that we never have to experience loss, not that we never experience adverse circumstances—we almost certainly will experience those things...but the promise is that whatever we have to give up will be more than worth it.

So let's bring this thing down to the ground really quickly before we close. If I had to guess, this week, none of you are gonna find out that you have a fiancée who's pregnant with the God of the universe. If so—let us know, because we'd love to get you some help. My guess is that tomorrow, God's not gonna call you to sell or give up everything you own in order to follow Jesus. But can I tell you what Jesus probably *is* going to happen? At some point this week, some of you *are* gonna have the opportunity to join in on the gossip and complaining about the person at work that everybody hates. And to not participate in it is gonna mean that your reputation might take a little hit—people are gonna see you a little less as 'one of them' if you don't participate. If I had to guess, at some point this week, somebody in your life or LifeGroup is gonna need something. And to help, you're gonna have to let loose of control over the plans you had for that day or that evening.

You see, it's the big acts of obedience that get all the press—things like readjusting your whole life's plan around an unexpected child that isn't yours. But I'd be willing to bet money that this wasn't the first time Joseph had made the decision to obey God. I'd be willing to bet he had a pattern in his life of obeying in a hundred little ways. And so when the time came to obey God in something big, something life-changing, he was ready. And because he had trained himself over years to remember that anything he had to lose was worth it, he was ready when the time came. That's the story of Joseph.

Let's pray.

The Story

[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.*

- Explain “betrothal,” societal expectations of it
- “I’m pregnant by the Holy Spirit.” “Sure you are.”

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

- Joseph’s a decent guy, keep it as quiet as possible
- Now, keep in mind, Joseph would not have been *wrong per se*, to do this. The whole point of betrothal was to determine if your pledged wife-to-be was chaste. By all perceptions, she wasn’t. Joseph was just doing what anybody would have done, and saving himself a ton of ridicule and outright persecution.
- But God had other plans:

[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.*

- God sends an angel to tell Joseph not to divorce Mary, but to stay with her, because she is pregnant via the Holy Spirit.
- Question worth asking: how much of that is new information to Joseph? *None of it*. Mary already told him that she was pregnant via the Holy Spirit. Joseph isn’t divorcing her because of the unknown father of the baby. He’s divorcing her because *even if he believed that*, no one else will.
- In other words the angel says, “don’t dodge this, this is how it needs to happen.” Worth noting that at this point in the story, God leads Joseph *into* difficulty, not away from it. “Oh, I can explain, she’s pregnant from the *Holy Spirit*—glad I could clear that up for you.” *Cultural correction here*. We constantly for God to “calm the storm—” but here, God leads Joseph straight into it.
 - Often very similar with us. *Following Jesus creates friction instead of eliminating it*.
Ridicule: If you’ve never had someone look at you funny, get weird around you, ridicule you, distrust you because you follow Jesus, you may not be following Jesus.
 - Two common responses to ridicule: *rejecting God* or *reinventing God*.

[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).*

- Why does the angel transition here into baby names? To our knowledge, that’s not a question Joseph was asking. As he was about to divorce his pregnant fiancée, he wasn’t going “and on top of all the ridicule stuff, I just don’t know what I’d *name the kid!*”
- In a Jewish culture like this, naming your child was far more significant than it is for many of us. Like, don’t get me wrong, we loved naming our son, but at the end of the day, we just picked a name that sounded cool. Whitaker means “white fields.” And that’s how a lot of people do it. But in a patriarchal culture like this one, it was the father’s undisputed right to name their kid. It was a sign of a father’s control over the family. So the angel telling Joseph what the kid would be named

was not just to say “you’re gonna have to save that really trendy name you had picked out.” It was God telling Joseph that this kid was not just gonna be Joseph’s kid, he was gonna be Joseph’s king. He was telling Joseph that he wouldn’t have control over Jesus, Jesus would have control over him.

- This is another one of the most difficult parts of following Jesus. Following Jesus means that you must yield your control to him. Many try the “addition” model to following Jesus: “I’ll keep everything about my life exactly the same, and then I’ll add God as a sort of icing on the cake.” So I’ll keep doing the things I want to do, but now I have Jesus to add to it all.
- Moralistic Therapeutic Deism here?
- To follow Jesus, you have to give up your “if/then” statements. “If God does this for me, then I will do what he wants,” “If God doesn’t ask me to do this, then I’ll obey him.” That’s not at all how it works.
- In order to follow Jesus, you’re going to have to do something that our culture thinks is absolutely crazy: deny yourself. I hear people say constantly “I just don’t feel like Jesus would want me to deny myself of things.” Have you read the gospels? Jesus does want you to deny yourself. *Lots* of yourself, actually. That’s kind of the point.
- Now, as crazy as all that sounds to some of us, look what Joseph does:

[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.

- Joseph does it. He listens to what the angel says, and willingly takes on all of the scorn and condemnation to come, and gladly yields control of his life, and listens to God.
- Now a fair question to ask is *why?* Who would do something like this? If following Jesus doesn’t make life better or easier, and if it means denying myself and yielding control to someone else, why does anyone ever do it? I mean that’s not the most appealing sales pitch for a religion, right? “Follow Jesus! If you do, people will ridicule you and your life won’t turn out anything like you thought it would! Here’s the sign-up sheet!” Jesus could really use a P.R. manager for his movement. Who volunteers for that? If I’m your life coach and you start following Jesus, I’m gonna be telling you you made a huge mistake. Because that looks like a really dumb trade. It looks certifiably insane.
- Hold that thought. Look with me at Matthew 13:44. Guy finds a treasure in a field, covers it up, and then goes and sells all he has to buy that field. Sells all he has to buy a field? I mean fields are great. I’m personally a big fan of wide open spaces...but sell *everything you have for a piece of land??* That’s quite an obsession with land there. And would’ve looked certifiably crazy from the outside looking in. And it is. Unless that treasure is worth infinitely more than everything you have to sell to get it. And that’s the point of the parable. The man who finds that treasure is so certain that the treasure is worth that much, that he “in joy” goes and empties himself of everything he has to obtain it. On the outside it would’ve looked like the craziest decision he’d ever made. But it was actually the best decision he’d ever made.
- So let me ask you this. For hundreds and hundreds of years, followers of Jesus have done exactly that. They’ve 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. People are doing that right now as we speak. Now you could call that a glorious delusion. All those people might be doing that because they are deceived and think they’re somehow earning God’s favor by doing it. And to be fair, some of them do it wrongly, for that type of reason. Or you

could assume that those people have found a treasure worth giving all of that up for. And that they, in their joy, are giving up whatever they need to give up to gain that treasure.

- Jim Elliot quote: "He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." Said that before he _____ - *research background*
- So let me ask you, does your life fit into that framework? Are there things you do with your life that only make sense if the following Jesus is worth it? Are there things you do with your money that only make sense if following Jesus is worth it? Do you make decisions that only make sense if following Jesus is worth it?
- If so, awesome. That would tell me you've found the treasure of great value. If not, is it possible that you think you're following Jesus when you're actually just adding him, trying to name him, trying to have him as icing on the cake?

much of the same treatment. But my salvation works like this—suffering leads to glory and death to resurrection. So have no fear. Receive Jesus Christ into your life, and *I* will be your honor. It doesn't matter what the world thinks."

So Mary and Joseph were willing to do for Jesus what Jesus was going to do for them. He became obedient to his Father, even unto death on a cross (Philippians 2:4–11). And when God called, they gave up their right to self-determination. If you really want Jesus in the middle of your life, you have to obey him unconditionally. You have to give up control of your life and drop your conditions. You have to give up the right to say, "I will obey you *if*. . . . I will do this *if*. . ." As soon as you say, "I will obey you *if*," that is not obedience. What that is really saying is: "You are my consultant, not my Lord. I will be happy to take your recommendations. And I might even do some of them." No. If you want Jesus *with you*, you have to give up the right to self-determination.

Mary does one last thing that can instruct us. She goes to Elizabeth, who speaks to her in the power of the Holy Spirit. That must have helped Mary a great deal. It certainly encouraged her; and it might have helped her understand her situation in a new way. For as soon as Elizabeth is done speaking, Mary breaks into a magnificent song. Indeed, it has been called "The Magnificat." She begins to worship and adore God with . . . and my spirit

translation,
Version, which says, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it
unto me according to thy word."

People sometimes say to me, "I would like to be a Christian, but will I have to do this? Will I have to give up doing that? Will I have to pray, give up sex, quit my job, change my views?" Certainly, questions like this have some legitimacy, because you do need to consider what it will cost you to become a Christian. Jesus himself tells us to "count the cost" of discipleship (Luke 14:25–33). But I'm afraid many people want to negotiate the cost rather than count it. That is, they are willing to give up things, but they won't give up the right to determine what those things are. They want to be in a position to do ongoing cost-benefit analyses on various kinds of behavior, which keeps them in the driver's seat, on the throne of their life, as it were. I once heard a Bible teacher put it like this—"When it comes to following Jesus, the hardest thing to give is *in*." When God comes to Abraham, he says, "Abraham, get out of your homeland, out of the land of the Chaldees, and follow me." Abraham says, "Where am I going?" And God

[200]

"I'm pregnant by the Holy Spirit."

Okay, so you're not even gonna try and come up with a good lie, you're just gonna go with the Holy Spirit got me pregnant? Cool, where does "Holy Spirit" live?? I'd like to pay him a visit, have a little chat with him.

two responses to ridicule: 1) rejecting God, 2) reinventing god

Do some background on what *betrothal* was. Legally binding, conservative culture, etc.

So easy to just skip right over the decision for him to stay with Mary like it's a given. This would have been an absolutely grueling, heartbreaking decision. The way it worked, their betrothal could be broke by infidelity or death only. And if Joseph decided to break it off, he not only saved him and his family years, even *generations* of embarrassment, but he got to keep her dowry. This was a potentially highly lucrative possibility for Joseph.

Joseph refuses to capitalize financially on the scenario that just fell into his lap, and instead chooses to face certain scorn, shame, and ridicule for the rest of his life (and likely his family too). "This is the guy who married the unfaithful woman."

Highly religious, hyper-conservative culture. You might be thinking "oh, so like eastern Tennessee." Yes, but exponentially more so. Think about today, if two people were engaged, and then the girl became pregnant. Even today, there'd be a certain stigma around that. But in that day, the shame, the stares, the judgment would've been palpable. Mary and Joseph wouldn't have been able to go hardly anywhere without people muttering under their breath at them.

"No room for them at the inn" most likely wasn't referring to a motel with a "no vacancy" sign. Most people stayed with their family or extended family. When the extended family members found out that they would be housing a woman pregnant out of wedlock, they shut their doors. Leaving Mary and Joseph with nowhere to stay.

[In dream—"from the Holy Spirit"] "Yeah you guys keep saying that—that's not exactly something I can just relay to my family to clear up confusion."

maybe as intro: stuff about following Jesus being the best way to live and the worst way to live. Tremendous joy, and tremendous difficulty