

Matthew Chapter 1 v 18 -25

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Date: 07 December 2014

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[0 : 00] It's a reading from verse 18 of Matthew and chapter 1. This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.

Because Joseph, her husband, was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet, The virgin will be with child, will give birth to a son.

They will call him Emmanuel, which means God with us. When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him, and took Mary home as his wife.

But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. He gave him the name Jesus. Let's go back again to Matthew in chapter 1, and to those familiar words of verses 18 through to 25.

[1 : 40] Familiarity breeds contempt. It's a well-known saying, and indeed bears much truth in it. And probably the Christmas story, the nativity as we call it, because it is so familiar to most people, has in one sense bred contempt.

By that I mean that the story of Christmas is so familiar that really people think of it with indifference. It's nothing special. It's nothing extraordinary.

It's just the good old nativity story, woven into our fabric through nativity plays, and from our childhood, and those of our own children and grandchildren.

We have this knowledge of the story of Christmas. And so, for most people, there is no real, nothing important about it anymore.

It's become, in one sense, it's contemptuous, contemptuous, rather. If we were to talk in any other context about angelic visitors, talk in any other context about a virgin birth, about wise men directed by comets, and so on, then there would be a stirring, an interest, a concern, a thoughtfulness.

[2 : 57] It's just a matter of fact. Of course, there are those as well, and even as Christians, who, because we know this story only so well, we feel as if, in one sense, it is disengaged from our lives.

These people that we read about, Mary and Joseph, and the shepherds, and the angels, in our minds, though we know it is true in its history, in one sense, it's almost a fairy story, in the sense that we've lost that sense of relevance for this story for ourselves.

Somehow, it's become so familiar that it's separated from the rest of Scripture. Not that it's not true, we believe it to be true, but somehow it's just disengaged from our real lives today.

But both of those views, which come about from familiarity, are wrong. And what I want us to do as we approach Christmas again this year, I hope that we will be surprised at what is revealed here, which is so relevant and contemporary for our own lives.

Not only in teaching us the unique birth of Christ and helping us to grasp and understand who He is, but also as we look at the lives of God's people who are involved and caught up in this great event of redemption, we see ourselves and learn from them.

[4 : 21] And so what I hope to do this week and the next two Sunday mornings is to focus on one person who is very central to the story. He's a person who often is considered the backroom boy of the nativity.

He's the one who's got nothing to say. He's the one who really sort of tags along and is towed along. But actually, he is very, very center stage in the events of what God was doing.

And that person, of course, is Joseph. And what I want us to do particularly is to look at the three occasions where God sends an angel to Joseph to direct him in a dream.

Now, if the importance of a character was measured by the number of times he was visited by an angel, Joseph would be top of the tree. Because when we think of John the Baptist, Father Zachariah, he only had one visit, Mary herself only gets one visit.

The shepherds, they admittedly get several thousand of angels all at once, but they get one visit. Joseph has three visits from an angel sent by God.

[5 : 32] And each time the angel comes, it is a crucial time in the life of Joseph, a pivotal point in his life and in the life of what we might call the family who, within whom the Lord Jesus Christ is born and raised.

And the instructions that he receives during that visit and the visit itself dramatically affect Joseph so that the whole course of his life is changed.

They are vital points, they are junctions in his life and they are indeed when the angel speaks. and though these events are unique and of course they are unrepeatable events, the coming of the Lord Jesus in this way, still there is something about each one of them which speaks to us.

Speaks to us in the similar circumstances and challenges of our lives and in the situations that we face regularly. So what does God have to say to us through Joseph's experiences and the angels that he sent that will help us and speak to us today?

Well, we need to notice what was going on of course in Joseph's life when the first angel came. Joseph was facing the challenge of a very difficult decision. He was faced with having to make a very difficult decision.

[6 : 59] He had to decide whether he was going to marry Mary or not. Verse 19, because Joseph, her husband, was a righteous man, did not want to expose her to public disgrace. He had in mind to divorce her.

Who we should marry of course is a very, very important decision. In fact, whether we should marry as well is a very important decision. It's one of several important decisions that we are faced with, difficult decisions that we are faced with in our lives.

And the reason that they're difficult and the reason they're important is because so much of our future hangs upon the outcome of our decision. Whether we are to marry or not, who we are to marry, whether we should go to Ust University or that university or no university, whether we should follow and pursue that career or this career, whether we should live here or live there, our children, our retirement, and so on throughout our lives at various times and more frequently than we would like, we are faced with calls to make difficult choices.

And so with Joseph, here was the most difficult choice, the most difficult decision he'd faced so far in his life. Should he marry Mary or not?

Well, why was it difficult? Well, we know why it was difficult because in verse 18 we're told, Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph but before they came together she was found to be with child.

[8 : 27] That's the problem. Mary, his fiancée, was pregnant. Joseph knew that he could not possibly be the father of that child. We're told there before they had come together there had been no sexual relationship between them in any way.

Clearly, Mary has told Joseph that she's pregnant. He didn't know any other way unless she told him so she told him almost certainly as soon as the angel had left her in Luke's account she went to Joseph and said, I've got this incredible news, Joseph.

It's wonderful. It's marvelous. It's brilliant. He's going, wow, what's it going to be? I'm pregnant.

That's not the news he was hoping to hear. And then she would have told him, of course, about the angel and about Gabriel and about God and about the Messiah and all these things but all his mind could think of she's pregnant and I'm not the father and we're not even married yet.

and it seems that again if we look into Luke's account that then she left Nazareth after she told him she goes for three months to visit her elderly cousin Elizabeth who was barren all her life but in later age by God's grace was unable to become pregnant in a very wonderful way and she leaves poor Joseph three months deciding what he's going to do.

got three months to make the most crucial decision of his life so far. He's faced with this perplexing problem.

[10 : 05] He's betrothed. I'm almost certain he was deeply in love with Mary but she who he loves is with child. What are his options?

When we face a decision and we face a choice we have options. Well what is Joseph's options? Well let's just try to understand a little bit of the background of what it meant to be engaged in those days.

One of the commentators wrote this and so this is how we understand it. In Jewish law betrothal being engaged which lasted about a year was much more than just an engagement.

It was a binding contract terminated only by death which left the betrothed a widow or by a divorce as if for a full marriage.

The man was already called the husband that's why there in verse 19 though they are only betrothed and not married he is called her husband. The woman remained in her father's house there was no relationship between each other they weren't living as husband and wife or anything like that and the marriage was completed only when the husband took his betrothed to come to his home in a very public ceremony where we read there verse 24 when Joseph woke up he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded and took Mary home as his wife.

[11:27] That was the act of marriage. So there were two types of divorce that Joseph could choose from here and it would need a divorce for this engagement to be broken. One was he could do it publicly.

He could accuse Mary of adultery and she would be then put on a public trial and if the law was to be kept then she would have been stoned to death or he could do it privately a private divorce which took place just in the presence of two witnesses.

But of course he had other choices as well. He didn't just have choices about divorce he had choices about marriage. He could marry her. He could marry her in spite of her seeming unfaithfulness he could accept she just made a mistake.

and seek to raise the child as his own and just say well it's one of those things. Or of course he could marry her believing her story.

Believing that God had given her this child and that all was true. So many choices. So many options. What's the right one? What should I do?

[12:37] It must have been very confusing for him but it must have been very painful for him as well. Very difficult for us to appreciate just how painful it would have been.

Surely he would have gone through those stages of deep distress and upset maybe to anger perhaps even a little bit resentment and bitterness before moving on to acceptance and a settled decision.

I wonder if you've experienced something like that faced with a very difficult choice and decision. Perhaps even this morning I don't know you're wrestling with a thorny problem in your life a complex difficult decision a choice and you feel nowhere really near making a decision on it.

Should I go this way or should I go that? Should I act in this way or should I act in that? Should I maybe I don't know you may be somebody even this morning and you've been wrestling with this whole decision should I put my faith in the Lord Jesus Christ?

Should I put my trust in him turn to him and it's tearing you apart perhaps the decision you're having to make? Should I stay or go?

[14:00] If I stay there will be trouble if I go it will be double if you know a song then you'll know there's lines from a song sorry should I stay or should I what should I do? Well what can we learn here what can we learn from Joseph we're faced with these decisions we will face them or we have faced them or we are facing them well the first thing we learn from Joseph is need to take our time take our time it's clear that Joseph doesn't act hastily notice that we have there Joseph had in mind divorce verse 19 but after he'd considered this it's clear that he was sinking through all these things he wasn't going to make a knee-jerk reaction his knee-jerk reaction would almost certainly be the wrong one but it shows that he gives time and consideration that's of course what makes decision making so painful because it goes on and on it sort of keep one way one minute we've decided yes I'm going to do this and oh no no no I'm going to it stirs us up it gives us indigestion doesn't it we naturally want to make the decision there and then we naturally want to make the decision and get it over and done with and get it out the way and move on perhaps even people have given us that advice oh why don't you just do this and why don't you just do that

I mean of course poor Joseph couldn't speak to anybody about it could he because to do that would be to expose Mary but we can be sure that if we act too rashly if we jump to a decision very quickly then we shall almost certainly arrive at the wrong one almost certainly arrive at the wrong one and I'm sure many of you like me have done that from time to time we've jumped at a situation we've

made a decision and it's blown up in our faces but there's something more here for the reason why Joseph doesn't rush into that decision I believe there's something much more than just common sense that we learn here from Joseph because we understand that he is a righteous man that means that he is a believer that's shorthand in the Bible for a believer for a man who's walking with God in a relationship with God a righteous man and so what do we find not only does he take his time he gives time to God he gives time for God to speak he gives time for God to reveal his will now that's an act of faith it's trusting in God it's looking to God to speak and to reveal his will and even more than that to bring about his will see it's unthinkable really that

Joseph wouldn't have prayed he is a believer it would be natural for him to pray just as natural for us to seek God's will to seek God's plot mind in the matter to seek God's direction and certainly dear friends that's what we must do he would have known of course the scriptures he's brought up under the word of God in the Old Testament he would have known that wonderful passage in Proverbs trust in the Lord with all your heart lean not on your own understanding in all your ways acknowledge him and he will make your path straight he would have known that and he would have acted upon that and that's why he doesn't leap as it were to his decision but thinks and considers and waits on God see waiting on God is active it's not passive it's not sitting down and crossing your legs and putting your feet up and saying well that's it it's over to you God nothing for me to do it's an active faith which is seen in prayer but is seen in resting in him the psalmist psalms are full of the expression waiting on the Lord here's one psalm 40

I waited patiently for the Lord he turned to me and heard my cry see I waited patiently on the Lord what was he doing when he was waiting patiently he was praying have you prayed about this decision that you're on the verge of making have you have you waited upon God have you let it stew a little bit in one sense he said Lord I'm looking to you to make your will known I'm looking to you I'm not going to jump I'm not going to rush I know that you are the one whose will it is that I want to do and as Joseph is waiting as he is waiting upon the Lord after he's considered these things we see of course then that God does break in and speaks to him through the angel after he considered this an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said Joseph son of David now we must remember of course that angels are merely messengers of God that's what the word angel means it means messenger so we don't need to expect that God has to send an angel to be his messenger he did and when we look through the scriptures you find that the only times God sends angels are specifically key events in redemptive history it's not when somebody is deciding whether they're going to move house or not or whether they're going to change their job or not it's only when something crucial to the whole event of the gospel and salvation was taking place the angels came so that God might make his word all the more certain and clear but God still speaks to us he is the speaking God he's not a silent God he's the speaking God and he speaks to us through his word yes Joseph had the old testament but we have the complete scriptures the completed and full perfect word of God that's why when Paul writes to Timothy he speaks about this is the God breathed word for correcting rebuking and directing that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped fully equipped there's nothing outside of the word of God that we need to know it's all there for us therefore we need to read it don't we therefore we need to study it therefore we need to come to it in prayer if we're praying and looking to God for his direction and will and purpose and decision making then we need to come and say right

[20 : 19] Lord what are you saying to me in your word what is it you want me to hear here's the psalmist again Psalm 119 your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path when we read God's word he reveals his will to us so Joseph waits on God he gives time for God to speak let me encourage you to do just that in whatever decisions you have to make wait on God in prayer Lord speak to me read his word open it to me Lord teach me and show me but the answer that Joseph receives of course is something quite different to what he'd decided isn't it he did not want to expose her he had in mind he'd made a sort of a preliminary decision that he would divorce her quietly that seemed to be the kindest thing to do not to expose her publicly but to have a quiet divorce but what does the angel say what does

God say do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife he gets a very different direction so we learn this the right answer may be the wrong answer the right answer might be the wrong answer Joseph after careful thought did what he thought and considered to be the right thing it seemed to be the right way the best thing he was a righteous man remember a God honoring man and therefore he wanted to honor God he couldn't live a lie he couldn't go through life with everyone

thinking the child was his he couldn't go about as a deceiver it's not right to be a deceiver it's not right to live a lie and if that meant he had to walk away from the woman he loved costly and painful that would be for them both he would do the right thing but it was the wrong thing it was the wrong thing wasn't it and when we sit down and we make a decision and choice we may sit down and say here's all the pros for making a decision to go this way and here's all the cons here's the good things for it and the bad things against it and we weigh it up and then we've prayed about it as well and we've even sought counsel about it as well and in the end we make our decision and say right I'm going to go this is my decision and choice we must be prepared dear friends that it's actually the wrong one we must be prepared that we are wrong and actually God's way is right we need to be teachable we need to be open we need to be those who say to the Lord your will not mine and even when we've come to that place where we believe that everything we've thought about and everything we've decided is right and glorifying to God and should be we need to be prepared for God to speak and say no I've got something different in mind one of the problems is of course dear friends is that once we've decided something we can be intransigent I've decided that this is the right thing I don't care what happens I'm going to stick my head down and I'm going to charge and I'm going to go because I know it's right how many times have we done that fallen flat on our faces God is gracious God is good before Joseph can fall flat on his face the Lord speaks before Joseph can commit himself to doing something which will end in tragedy God speaks are we teachable will we listen even when we think we're right to God and the other thing as well dear friends is for us to see here is that we need to take time and we need to give God time and we need not to be afraid that's one of the things that grips us isn't it what if I make the wrong decision we can become sort of like Lot's wife can't we pillars of salt we're stuck and rooted to the ground because we just feel unable to make a decision because if I go that way it could be the wrong one and we're just stuck but notice what the angel says to Joseph don't be afraid to take

Mary home as your wife he's not saying don't be afraid of me and angel appearing you just like Gabriel did to Mary he means this don't be afraid of making a wrong turn don't be afraid don't be afraid to take Mary home don't be afraid of the consequences don't be afraid of what others will think of you don't be afraid dear friends there are times when ultimately we have to act the decision is before us the choice is before us if we have prayed about it if we have read God's word if we have given time and again I would say if we've been teachable and consulted with God's people in the matter and ultimately in the end it seems to be that this is the right way as much as we can tell then step out not fearing if it's wrong God will overrule it if it's wrong God will make it clear and if it's right he will bring you through it don't be afraid fear makes us immobile it enslaves us fear wraps us up and will not let us go we need not be afraid because we need to have faith which frees and the reason that we should have faith and not be afraid very simply as we close is there's three things that we see here three applications again for us today one is this

[26 : 22] God has a plan and purpose in this choice for you God has a plan we see that with Joseph Joseph son of David don't be afraid to take Mary home as your wife because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit she will give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins it's all part of God's plan this difficult decision this difficult choice that Joseph was faced with didn't come about by chance or accidents it was all part of God's plan in dealing with him and preparing him and setting him up for what God had in the future for him dear friends as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ we believe and know that God has a plan and purpose not just for his church universal not just for the world as it is but for us as individuals for you dear friends and for me a plan which is for our good so trust him trust him that he will direct you trust him that he will guide you trust him that he as you seek his will that he will enable you to keep it and to do it and this plan that he has for you dear friends is a plan which is going to bring glory to his name verse 22 all this took place to fulfill what the

Lord had said through the prophet the virgin will be with child and give birth to a son and they will call him Emmanuel which means God with us God is working out his purposes for his glory in your life and mine this may seem to be you know we think well my life is insignificant my life has no real purpose my life is just one of the six or seven billion people on this planet how on earth can my life have any meaning or be useful in this world it is because it is in God's hands it is because it is God's life it is because God has a plan in it to work through it for his glory you and I have been saved for that very purpose you and I have been brought into the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ for his glory Joseph oh who's he he does nothing to contribute does he he's not very important he's

a carpenter from Nazareth how could God use him he could use him because he was one of his own men he could use him because his desire was to do what was right with God and God was pleased to work in through him and dear friends he is working in and through your life to bring honour and glory to his name do not be afraid but act faith and action go together faith and action go together they're not separate things they belong to one another James read that you'll know all about it faith is trusting God to be sovereign even over our mistakes not over now let me be careful here let us not say and let us be very careful that we do not say when I choose to do what I want to do then God will always work it out for good he's gracious but if we choose a sinful path if we choose to go our own way if we choose a decision if we take this back a minute and think about coming to faith in Christ if we say I will not come to faith in Christ and I will not have him as my saviour then we are responsible for the consequences of that choice and if in our lives as Christians dear friends we say I will do what I want to do and I will go the way I want to go and I will do the things that please me and I will pay lip service to God and his will but he's sovereign then we are trying to make mockery of God and he is not to be mocked we must dear friends take him at his word and his promises but we have a responsibility of faith and actions faith to trust him that he will work all things for good but actively seeking his will and seeking always that which is pleasing to him there's a principle for which Jesus tells us we're to live by and it's a very simple principle but if only you and I would live it how content we would be seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be added unto you as well seek first his righteousness and all these things will be added unto you as well

Joseph was a man who sought the righteousness of God God revealed his will to him and enabled him to carry it out that he might bring glory and praise and blessing isn't it wonderful Joseph he thought he was going to lose the woman he loves but he gets the woman he loves and much much more besides what a great romance let's pray together thank you father God again for the wonderful way that you work in our lives we thank you so much that you are bigger than our mistakes and our failures you're bigger than our wrong turns and our u-turns and Lord we thank you again that you have wonderfully a plan for us if we will submit ourselves to you to your will and your desire and Lord we thank you for Joseph for his example to us we thank you that in the midst of what was a very difficult decision making process

[32 : 18] Lord you spoke and revealed your will that he might do it and he did do it and so we pray for ourselves we pray first of all Lord that you would give to us that same longing and desire to wait on you and to look to you to know your will but also we ask oh Lord for obedient hearts that as you reveal your will to us in whatever decisions and choices we make that we may do it even though it may be costly in fact oh Lord it almost certainly will be costly help us to make that decision of your will and to act upon it with faith without fear for we know oh Lord that you are the God who rules over all who works in all things for the good of those you love we ask these things now as we contemplate and think upon them lead us Lord Jesus Amen May the God of peace who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord

Jesus that great shepherd of the sheep equip you with everything good for doing his will and may he work in us what is pleasing to him through Jesus Christ to whom be the glory now and forever more Amen