

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Bible Families: Joseph and Mary

Today we come to the last in our series on Bible families. We can readily say of this particular family, the family of Joseph and Mary, sometimes referred to as "the holy family", last but not least. No other family, in the Bible or in history, is more important than this family. Why do I say this?

Firstly, because it was into this family that the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God was born - born to be the Saviour of the world. His birth, life, death and resurrection have not only profoundly affected the course of human history but they also form the basis whereby eternal life has been brought to mankind. As we come near to Christmas, the time when we remember the coming of the Saviour, it is right that our thoughts turn today to this particular family.

Secondly, it was to Mary and Joseph that God entrusted the privilege of bringing into the world His Son and of bringing up that holy Child. While some may stand in awe of this family, we do well to remember that both Joseph and Mary had "a nature like ours", to use the words which James uses of the prophet Elijah (James 5:17). We can all, therefore, learn from the family life of Joseph and Mary. Perhaps the greatest characteristic of that life is obedience. We see that obedience both in the separate lives of Joseph and Mary before they were married and in their married life together. We need to look at that obedience in some detail today. Firstly, then, obedience to the message of the angel.

We ought to read the familiar verses from Matthew 1: "Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly. But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins'" (verses 18-21).

We should not underestimate the bombshell that this news must have been to Joseph. At that time, betrothal (similar to our engagement) was almost as binding as marriage itself. Unfaithfulness within this betrothal period was as serious a sin as within marriage itself. We are specifically told that Joseph was a just, or upright, man. He knew that there was no way in which this baby could be his. The blameless behaviour of both Joseph and Mary during this betrothal period is in marked contrast to today when, sadly, so many babies are born out of wedlock. Thus Mary and Joseph did the proper basis for their married life together.

Yet Joseph was deeply anxious to spare Mary from public humiliation. He accepts in simple faith the declaration of the angel that this special child, conceived of the Holy Spirit, was none other than the Saviour, God with us. Notice, then, how that faith moves Joseph to act in total obedience to the message of the angel: "Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name Jesus" (verses 24-25).

Mary also displays that same quality of simple faith and the obedience which springs from it. Listen to Luke's record: "Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And having come in, the angel said to her, "Rejoice, highly favoured one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!" But when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was. Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest." Then Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God"...Then Mary said, "Behold, the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word." (1:26-38).

Mary's response is so beautiful. She was prepared to sacrifice her reputation, and that of the man she loved. How many of her neighbours would believe the story of this miraculous birth? Much more likely that they would nudge each

other and wink knowingly! Hers was no enforced obedience but, rather, the joyful response of love. Little wonder that some time later she would burst forth in that song of praise: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour. For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; for behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed. For He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name" (verses 45-49).

Secondly, we should notice that Mary and Joseph together demonstrate their obedience to the civil power. The last thing in the world that Mary would have wished, with her baby almost due to be born, would be to take that uncomfortable journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, a journey of some 75 miles. Joseph must equally have wished to spare his wife the rigours of such a difficult journey. But Rome had spoken, and Rome must be obeyed! Already they displayed that attitude which Paul would enjoin on the Christians at Rome some years later: "Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities" (Romans 13:1). Mary and Joseph return to their birthplace for they were both of the royal line of David.

It seems likely, however, that the obedience of Mary and Joseph had a deeper motive than enforced obedience to Rome. They would be well aware that the prophet, Micah, about 700 years previously, had foretold: "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to me the One to be ruler in Israel, whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting" (5:2). They would undertake that difficult journey to Bethlehem as willing participants in the eternal purposes of God.

So Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem. There, because of the large numbers of visitors, they are forced to take refuge in a stable – not the glamorised version we see on our Christmas cards, but a cold, dark, smelly outbuilding. So Luke tells us, "And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn" (2:7). This, surely, was not what Mary, with her mother love, would have wished for her firstborn. Joseph, with his skill as a carpenter, could surely have fashioned a far more comfortable crib for this special Child. But all these feelings they sacrificed in their obedience. Contrary to the scenes enacted in countless nativity plays, Matthew tells us that it was to a house that the wise men came, bearing their precious gifts (Matthew 2:11). Subsequently Herod, in his fury, commanded that all baby boys of two years and under should be killed.

We should notice, again, the obedience of Joseph and Mary to the message of the angel. So Matthew tells us, "An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him."

When he arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt, and was there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, "Out of Egypt I called My Son" (2:13-15). But how would they survive in such a foreign land so many miles away, with its alien culture? Would Joseph be able to find employment to provide for his family? But God had already provided for the family! Those precious gifts brought by the wise men - the gold, the frankincense and the myrrh - would provide for the needs of the family should occasion demand it. Mary and Joseph would learn, as Moses had to learn centuries earlier, "If God so commands you, then you will be able" (Exodus 18:3). How truly it has been said, "God's work, done in God's time and in God's way, will never lack God's resources".

In due time, wicked King Herod died. God, ever true to His promises, sent an angel with the message: "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the young Child's life are dead" (Matthew 2:20). In characteristic obedience, Mary and Joseph return with the Lord Jesus to Nazareth. They might have gone to Jerusalem, the religious centre, where their presence might be expected to arouse some interest. But no! In lovely humility, they go back to Nazareth where they belonged. They would not be deterred by the fact that, some years later, Nathanael would ask in amazement, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). Such was the reputation of that despised place!

We must note, thirdly, that the family life of Mary and Joseph was characterised by obedience to the word of God. That obedience had been first demonstrated when the baby Jesus, at eight days old had been circumcised, as Moses' law had demanded (Leviticus 12:3). Then He was given the name Jesus (Luke 2:21). Some 33 days later, again as Moses' law demanded, Mary and Joseph came to the temple in Jerusalem to offer for Mary's purification. It would appear that they were unable to afford the lamb for a burnt offering. So they bring the minimum which the law required - two turtledoves or pigeons, one as a burnt offering, the other as a sin offering (Luke 2:22-38). This was the poverty of the home into which the Lord of glory chose to be born! "Though He was rich, yet for [our] sakes He became poor" (2 Corinthians 8:9).

There in the temple, the aged Simeon takes the child, Jesus, in His arms and worships God: "My eyes have seen Your salvation". But Simeon has also to warn Mary of the rejection which her Son would face, and adds, "A sword will pierce through your own soul also".

That obedience to the word of God continued as year by year, Mary and Joseph went up to Jerusalem to keep the Passover. When the Lord Jesus was 12 years' old, and therefore legally a member of the congregation of Israel, Mary and Joseph took Him with them to celebrate the feast. On the return journey, Luke tells us: "Supposing Him to have been in the company, they went a day's journey, and sought Him among their relatives and acquaintances. So when they did not find Him, they returned to Jerusalem, seeking Him. Now so it was that after three days they found Him in the temple" (Luke 2:41-52).

Christian friend, learn this lesson! Never only suppose that the Lord Jesus is in your company! Keep in living touch with Him day by day and throughout each day in prayer and reading His word. One day of supposition meant three wasted days for Mary and Joseph! When they eventually find Him, Mary chides; "Son, why have You done this to us? Look, Your father and I have sought You anxiously?" Jesus' reply is prophetic of His whole life's work: "Why is it that you sought Me? Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?"

But though the home in Nazareth might be materially poor, it was spiritually rich. God was honoured and loved. The Lord Jesus would be brought up "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4). In that loving environment, we read "the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him"; and later, "Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men" (Luke 2:40, 52).

There in Nazareth, Joseph would ply his trade of carpenter, teaching Jesus that same trade. In the goodness of God, other children were born to Mary and Joseph. Mark records the comments of the crowd during Jesus' public ministry: "Is not this the carpenter, the Son of Mary, and brother of James, Joses, Judas, and Simon? And are not His sisters here with us?" (6:3).

It seems likely that Joseph must have died before the public ministry of the Lord Jesus since the Gospel writers do not refer to him during this time. There are references to Mary, the most notable of which is found in John 19. Mary stood by the cross of Jesus in all the distress which the crucifixion must have meant to her. How Simeon's words must have come home to her then! But there the Lord Jesus, despite His intense physical sufferings, lovingly commends His mother to the care of His disciple, John. John tells us: "Now there stood by the cross of Jesus His mother...when Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing by, He said to His mother, "Woman, behold your son!" Then He said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour that disciple took her to his own home" (John 19:25-27).

As we think of this special family today, what is the lesson which we can learn from them for ourselves in this 20th century, on the eve of a new millennium? It has to be the importance of obedience to God in our individual and family lives. Indeed, on one occasion when His brothers and Mary felt that Jesus should take note of them in preference to the multitude, Mark tells us: "But [Jesus] answered them, saying, "Who is My mother, or My brothers?" And He looked around in a circle at those who sat about Him, and said, "Here are My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of God is My brother and My sister and mother" (3:31-35). True relationship with the Lord Jesus is not a matter of natural birth but of obedience to Him.

Through faith in the Lord Jesus who died on the cross for our sins, we can know the blessing of sins forgiven and enjoy a living relationship with Him. In that way, we come into God's family, the true "holy family". But that relationship needs to be shown out in our lives by obeying His word. So Peter can write, "As obedient children...be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, "Be holy, for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:14-16).

A prayer: God our Father, we give thanks for the coming of the Lord Jesus to be our Saviour. As we stand on the eve of this new millennium, help us to learn these lessons of obedience. Amen.

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