

## Series: Embracing a Radical Faith

VBC

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Matthew 1:18-24

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### “When God Ruins Your Reputation”

Sometimes we can really get people wrong—especially quiet people—*people who don't say much*

- we assume maybe they are disinterested or vacant or vanilla personalities
- and then something happens—away from the crowd, a quiet conversation
- that completely turns our assumptions upside down

It's easy to do that with Joseph

- in our minds and in our dramas, Joseph has often played a shadow role, a two bit part
- the easiest actor to audition for—for he says nothing
- there are no lines to learn
- just stand there and look interested (after all—Joseph never speaks in the NT)

But reading the story in Matthew—you discover Joseph was anything but vacuous, unoccupied—BLANK

- there is a lot he has to say—even if he doesn't speak it
- a man whose speech is simply to do the will of God*
- who turns out to be the lead character
- a man who served Matthew's purpose—for he embraced radical faith—the theme of the book—1:18-25

What is it that defined Joseph—needs to define us?

- here's what stands out—

#### 1. CONVICTION

- Joseph stood for something—one word defined him— righteous— tsadiq—vs 19
- which in Jewish culture was the best reputation a person could have
- it meant he held to the highest of standards—was devoted himself to the Law
  - loved the Lord his God with all of his heart, soul, mind
  - and loved his neighbor as himself
  - this was his creed—something he would have recited every day from Dt 6:4-5

Application—if God summed up your life with one word—what would it be?

-faithful, joyful, righteous, generous, risk taker?

-righteous meant Joseph was a straight arrow—followed dietary laws—celebrated holy days

-no tattoos or clipping off the edge of the beard

-no sweet and sour pork—Red Lobster restaurants

-he would have never opened his carpentry shop on Saturdays

-would have never mixed it up with bad company

But Mary was about to potentially change all of this

-compromise Joseph's reputation

-for Mary was pregnant—and Joseph was not the father

-“before the came together” (vs 18) underscores they were not yet living together—sharing sexually

-though legally bound through engagement—they were not husband and wife

-that Mary “was found” to be pregnant was not news for Mary—for she had conceived some three months earlier through the Holy Spirit—Lk 1

-she had been away visiting her relative Elizabeth—who confirmed the angelical announcement

-and they both celebrated what God was doing

In other words—this wasn't material for the cable show I Didn't Know I Was Pregnant

-Mary was aware—but it seems to read that Joseph was not—and so now—after some time—he discovered this

-and maybe he wasn't informed up till now because...well...hard to explain

-how does one rationalize to a fiancé that the Holy Spirit—the power of the Most High “overshadowed” her—and she became pregnant?

*-tell a man she has just received a call to the most honored vocation imaginable in the kingdom of God—to be the mother of the Messiah?*

-Really? I mean really? Am I engaged to a woman needing psychiatric treatment?

-a woman hoping to cover an affair?

-and all of this had to have tested his convictions

-for the law was clear—Dt 22:21—*any woman discovered to not be a virgin shall be brought to her father's house and she and the seducer shall be stoned to death, for they have done a disgraceful thing in Israel*

-this was a capital crime

-Joseph could not be party to scandal, to adultery, to sin

-so he “decided” to get out of this relationship—vs 19

-men of conviction put their faith before their personal desires

-love for God had to come before love for Mary

-but Joseph was more than a man of conviction

-this story tells us something else—

## 2. COMPASSION

-while he could not overlook, dismiss, ignore this

-neither could he bring the full force of the Torah into play

-bring this to public trial so that his fiancé would be shamed

-and so Joseph—having considered, wrestled, processed—vs 20

-a word that conveys a heart deeply disturbed, feelings of disorientation—  
betrayal perhaps

-confused, upset, bewildered—for at its root—the word means wrath

-and yet in love with Mary

-Joseph chose something that exceeded the law—he decided to end this  
relationship secretly, divorce quietly

Illustration—when I was 18—I got engaged—it was not arranged by parents  
when we were 12

-it was an impulsive—rather mindless thing to do

-I wanted the security of a relationship while away at a military academy—  
letters to read

-and I remember the first night staring at the ceiling asking myself—what  
did I do

-how can I get out of this?

-Joseph must have asked similar questions—for different reasons

-but in Jewish culture—it was more complicated

-the pledge to be married was as binding as marriage

-ending it was the same as divorce

-if Joseph was to protect Mary—he would have to do it quietly—vs 19

-compassion forced him to this place

But conviction, compassion—important as they are—don't tell the best part about  
Joseph

## 3. COURAGE

-only at the end—when he had come to his conclusion—did God speak

-sometimes God lets us go this far—let's us wrestle and agonize—I'm  
sure as part of refining us

-and then He intervenes

-and the first thing God did was confront Joseph's fears—just as He does  
ours

- “fear not” tells us Joseph was afraid
- and fear is often our biggest obstacle to doing what we must do
- the main reason we are tempted to avoid doing what God asks us to do
- so what were Joseph’s fears?

- a. there was likely the obvious fear of being in the presence of God’s messenger—which would bring a certain amount of trepidation
- b. but maybe God saw in Joseph an even greater fear—the fear that if he kept this relationship—he would lose everything he had given his life to—his reputation
  - getting married to Mary...
  - he might as well eat pork ribs, hang out with the dregs, get body piercings, work on the Sabbath—and watch Dancing with Stars
  - as Ortberg puts it—if he married Mary—his friends would have lost respect
  - probably would have never accepted their account of what happened
  - they would have been asked to leave their LG, confess their sin before the congregation, withdraw membership

Illus—we live in a culture where every year a million teenage girls get pregnant out of wedlock—so the stigma might not be so great today

- but it would have been in this culture—especially in a small town where everyone knew everyone’s business
- the hot shame of living among villagers who could plainly see the changing shape of Mary
- nine months of awkward explanations—the scent of scandal
- “Joseph, they will be thinking, is attempting to cover up Mary’s big fat miracle story with a kosher Jewish wedding!” (McKnight)
- there would have also been the fear of a righteous man raising a child whose paternity was questioned
- small towns do not treat kindly young boys who grow up perceived as illegitimate—Yancey

But though Joseph feared—vs 24 tells us that down deep was a steely courage—(read)

- God summoned Joseph to something bigger than himself
- commanded him to step out in reckless abandon—and risk losing it
- man up—God up!
- take Mary as your wife—name the child as if He is yours

- with a name that will implicate everyone—for all of us fall short of God's glory
- we all need a Savior

- and Joseph in effect said—as did Mary—let it be to me according to Your word—I am the Lord's servant (Lk 1:38)
- and so he did as the angel ordered—committed himself without reserve
- living out in his noiseless way a righteousness that goes beyond the Torah

Some years ago, David Aikman of Time wrote the book Great Souls  
-in which he looked at the most compelling lives of the 20<sup>th</sup> century  
-and asked the question—what did they have in common?  
-his discovery perfectly fits Joseph—

1. Every great soul has phenomenal discipline
  - from early on—all through life
  - Joseph showed it his convictions—and even in his sexual restraint after marriage
2. *“Every great soul has this conviction that he/she has been touched by a divine call so unique only a personal God could have envisaged it, engineered the circumstances of it, communicated it, and provided the strength and energy necessary to carry it out”*

## CONCLUSION

Maybe God is summoning you to something—maybe not marry a virgin who is pregnant

- but something far bigger than yourself
- something of His choosing—*and we will only be ourselves when we are there*
- something that may not make any sense
- something that will cost you what you might want to least give up—like your reputation

- Joseph's story—as the start point of Matthew—tells us this is to be expected for Christ's followers

*-it's part of embracing a radical faith*

- submitting to this reality that God's ways are not our ways
- God's righteousness is not our righteousness

- Illustration—Mrs. Brooks—sharp, acid tongue—she taught us how to speak

- and she expected nothing but our best in tournaments
- and I liked her a lot—but she had no interest in Christianity
- looked at believers with skepticism—maybe a certain disdain

-and whenever she heard that people like myself had decided to give our lives to Jesus—go in ministry—responded with—what a waste

-Matthew reminds us through Joseph that what ultimately matters is what God thinks—not others

-this will be a theme in Matthew

-Peter, James, and John will be asked to give up their identities and follow Jesus—chap 4

-Matthew will be called to leave his profession—chap 9

-the disciples are warned they might lose their status as law abiding citizens and be handed over and publically humiliated—chap 10

-die to status and comfort—embrace radical faith

WILL WE?