

**A JOURNEY TO CHRISTMAS**  
**THE STORY OF MARY AND JOSEPH**

Matthew 1:18-25, Luke 1:26-56, Isaiah 7:13-16

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Mary was a bright young woman approaching the later years of her teenage life. Many suitors had approached her father asking for his daughter's hand in marriage. But each time he said, "no," because he knew that his daughter had eyes for only one man, Joseph the carpenter. He had arrived a few years earlier and had proven himself to be a genuine craftsman. Yes, he was quite a bit older than Mary, but that really didn't matter. Many young women married older men and most importantly Joseph was a good man. He was a leader in the synagogue. In fact, some thought that one day he might even become a rabbi. Yes, Joseph was a good man, the kind of man who would take care of his daughter no matter what.

So one day Jacob paid a visit to the carpenter's shop. It was a quiet afternoon and no customers were about. After a few words of greeting, Jacob got down to business. He said, "I know that this is not the usual way. It is the prospective groom who comes to the father asking for his daughter's hand. But Joseph, my daughter has loved you from the very first day you arrived in our village. Ever wonder why I paid so many visits to your shop and why Mary always accompanied me?" Joseph reflected for a moment and thought back over the years since his arrival. Jacob was right. That little girl always arrived with a smile on her face and a bounce in her step. But could it be that this little girl had grown into a woman? My how the years had so quickly passed. Perhaps it was time to seek out a wife and he could think of no one other than Mary. Yes, he had to admit, she occupied a special place in his heart.

The next Sabbath, a betrothal announcement was made at the conclusion of the service. Joseph and Mary were to be wed, not immediately, but after a suitable time of engagement. Mary was ecstatic, literally aglow with joy. Her dream had come true, at least she thought so until that evening when she met a man on the way to the village well. It was growing dark and she knew it was not good to be out alone after sunset. But an extra urn of water was needed and she thought she could fetch it and get back home before anyone noticed. She was wrong. Out of the shadows a young man stepped, strong but at the same time unthreatening. He said, "Greetings. You are highly favored. The Lord is with you." Startled and shaken, Mary was frightened. "Don't be afraid, Mary," the man continued. "You have found favor with God. You will be with child and give

birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever. His kingdom will have no end." Now completely alert and recognizing that this was no ordinary visitation, Mary replied, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The man, whom Mary now knew was an angel, responded, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God." Then as if to reassure her that what he was saying was true the angel continued, "Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God." Even as the visage of the angel was fading from view, Mary responded, almost in a whisper, replying not so much from her mind but from her heart, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be as you have said." Without realizing the full impact of what she had just said, Mary had surrendered her life to a sequence of events that would completely change her life.

But she could check things out and that's precisely what she did. She talked her father into letting her go to visit her aunt Elizabeth down in Judea to the south. Traveling with a group of distant relatives, she finally arrived at the home of Elizabeth. Greeting her, Elizabeth joyfully exclaimed, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored that the mother of my Lord should come to visit me?" Mary already knew that she felt different. Something was happening inside of her, but to hear Elizabeth's greeting and to see that she was six months pregnant, confirmed everything the angel had said and everything she was feeling. She burst out in song because she loved to sing and now she had something to sing about—chosen by God to be the mother of His Savior.

As Mary prepared to return to Galilee after her visit with Elizabeth, there was just one small problem, how to tell Joseph. Would he believe her? Wearing loose fitting clothing, as was the custom for women, could hide a pregnancy, almost to the very end. But in her heart she knew she could not hide what was happening to her from her dearly beloved Joseph. Returning home after spending three months with Elizabeth, she found a way to speak with Joseph without a chaperon overhearing their conversation. It didn't go well. Joseph didn't get angry, he didn't fly off the handle, but it was obvious that he didn't believe her. He just stood up, excused himself and walked out the door.

So that's why Jacob came to me and asked me to marry his daughter, Joseph thought. Somebody had gotten her pregnant and if he married her he would be accused of not only violating the laws of God, but of being the father of a child that was not his own. A pretty good trap and he had fallen for it. Yes, he still loved Mary with all of his heart, but he also loved God. He was not going to be

caught up in something that not only violated his convictions, but also suggested that he had fathered a child out of wedlock. That just wasn't going to happen. He would go to Jacob and quietly break off the engagement. He would not accuse Mary publicly of being unfaithful. That would be devastating for Mary and indeed her entire family. Instead, he would pack up his belongings, close his carpenter's shop and move back to Bethlehem. Everyone would probably hold him responsible for the pregnancy, but at least he would be free to get on with his life without being dragged into a moral quagmire that he didn't want to be a part of. It probably wasn't the best solution to this problem, but it was the only one he could think of. Evidently something had happened before her visit to Elizabeth and this story about an angel was an attempt to convince him otherwise.

Deeply troubled, he hardly slept that night, but finally dozed off in the wee hours of the morning. He was awakened by a dream, a dream that was so real that he knew it was more than just his own rambling disjointed thoughts. This dream came from somewhere outside of himself, like the dreams recorded in the pages of the Old Testament. This was a message from God. In the dream an angel had appeared and spoken to him saying, "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." The next morning he returned to the home of Jacob and asked if he could speak privately with Mary. He told her of his own divine visitation. He told her what the angel had said. Then taking her in his arms for the very first time, something that was usually forbidden before the marriage ceremony, he whispered, "Mary, I love you. I will take you to be my wife and I will be the earthly father for this child that God is giving to us. I don't understand what all of this means, but I suspect that it's a part of something much bigger than either of us could ever imagine."

Now what does this story about Mary and Joseph, taken from the Scriptural accounts in Matthew and Luke have to say to us today? I think there are two things. First of all, the importance of submission. Mary and Joseph had other plans for their lives until God got involved. Everything they had hoped for was turned upside down and inside out. They could have told the Lord, "No we don't want to be a part of what You are doing. Leave us alone!" But they didn't. They willingly accepted this new plan for their lives without rancor or animosity. They allowed God to work through them in ways which were both unnerving and perplexing. How about you and me, especially as we face the latter years of our lives? We have our routines, our ongoing way of life and we'd rather not have it disturbed. Then something comes along and our world is turned upside down. How are we going to respond? Are we going to be submissive and let God lead

us through this time of change and transition, or are we going to rebel and resist His leadership?

I cannot help but wonder what my mother was thinking when her son, her daughter-in-law and their two children showed up at her doorstep without anywhere else to live. Her calm, orderly way of life had come to an abrupt end. Without a moment's hesitation, she moved to the apartment over the garage next to her home so that we could occupy the house in which she had lived for 35 years. In fact, this whole new arrangement was her idea. For sure, her world had been turned upside down, but she accepted it without anger or animosity. In fact, she joined right in and was a vibrant part of our lives and the lives of her grandchildren. She was there to greet them when they came home from school and because both Sherry and I were employed, most of the evening meals were the result of her handiwork. She knew that submission is a key ingredient in dealing with the issues of life, whether they are the result of what God is accomplishing in our lives or simply caring for the needs of His children.

Here's the second thing that this story about Mary and Joseph tells us. God keeps His promises. The Jewish people desperately wanted God to free them from their foreign masters. A long succession of adversaries had ruled over them beginning with the Babylonians, then Persians, then Greeks and now the Romans. They wanted to be free, to have their own nation, just like in the days of David. That's what they believed the prophets had promised. Why was God waiting so long to keep His word? Had He forgotten them? Yes, their religious leaders were aware of what God had said, for example, that passage in Isaiah 7:14, which talked about a young maiden bearing a son who would be named Immanuel. But they believed that passage of Scripture had been fulfilled hundreds of years earlier during the reign of one of their kings before the Babylonian Exile. What was He going to do now? Little did they realize that this ancient prophecy was about to be fully and wonderfully fulfilled in their own day and time. The maiden was not just a girl of marriageable age, but a true virgin who would be the mother of Immanuel, not just God with us, but God's Son born and living among us. Wow! God does keep His promises. It may take a while and He may not keep them in the way we expect. The Jewish people, for example, were looking for a military leader, not a child born in a stable. Nevertheless, He kept His Word.

So what does that have to do with us? Everything! Our relationship with the Lord is based upon His promises—His promise to save us, His promise to watch over us and His promise to prepare a home for us in heaven. The birth of Christ was the fulfillment of a divine promise He had made to His people through the prophet Isaiah. May we too come to the place in our own lives where we can fully trust in what He has promised us with a willing and submissive heart.