

An unsung hero

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[0 : 0 0] I want us to spend a little time this evening thinking about who I'm describing as an unsung hero of the Christmas story of the birth narratives that we have in the Gospels in Matthew and Luke, and I'm referring to Joseph. We don't know much about Joseph. We're not told a great deal about him, but I think he does have a great deal that he can teach us. There's quite a debate that I've been observing, been on social media, but beyond social media as well, about whether there is merit or whether it's valid or how helpful it is to take a character like Joseph and treat him as an example for Christians in terms of how we can live. And it's sometimes argued that to do that can be very moralistic, where you're simply saying, well, look what a good guy he was. Well, you should be a good guy as well. And that somehow that detracts from the Gospel and a recognition that we're not good guys and that we stand in dependence on God's grace. I can see people's concern, but I do think that there is a place within a hopefully balanced teaching of God's Word to take men and women of

God as they're presented to us in the Scriptures and to be challenged by them and by their example and what we can learn from them. They are, of course, as we are sinners. And yet sinners who, with God's help and by God's grace, have much to teach us. And I think that's true of Joseph.

So I want to see what we can learn from him and perhaps some particular challenges that he presents to us. We've read the passage in Matthew's Gospel, in particular from verse 18 through to the end of the chapter. And as we consider Joseph, we want to do so looking at two stages, if you wish, a before and after look at him, before his encounter with the angel that's recorded for us in verse 20, and then after his encounter. What can we discover from him in these two ways or in these two times, before and after? So we'll think about what we're told about Joseph before his encounter with the angel. The first thing that strikes me about Joseph from what we're told is that he was very much an ordinary man. He was a regular guy. There was nothing particularly special about him.

He knew nothing about what God was planning to do in his life, how he was going to be involved in this amazing way in the drama of redemption. Nothing. He didn't have the faintest inkling of his involvement as it would pan out. Never in his wildest dreams or imaginations did he even consider that an encounter with an angel was something that would happen to him, far less the message that the angel brought him.

He was, we're told, a carpenter. And in as much as we can imagine what his aspirations were, I imagine he aspired to being a good carpenter, being a successful carpenter, to doing his work well, to have clients who were satisfied with the work that he had done, that would seek him out, that would recommend him to others. I would imagine he aspired to that. And perhaps in good measure he'd achieved that. He aspired also to forming a family, to marrying a hard-working and faithful woman, to being in due course a dutiful father, and to bringing up his children as respectful citizens and living lives that would be pleasing to God. And all of these aspirations, all of these ambitions, if indeed they did characterize him, which I'm sure they did, are good. They're good. And as we meet him, as we're introduced him for the first time, things are very much moving in that direction. He was, as we're told, already betrothed to be married to Mary. Now, I'm sure you've heard in the past an explanation as to this status, if you wish, of betrothal. And I think the best way it can be described is something in between engagement and marriage, as we would use that language. It was more than engagement, but it wasn't quite marriage. It did involve a formal contract, and to break that contract required divorce. However, during the year that ordinarily the betrothal would last, the woman, the wife-to-be, remained with her parents, and there was certainly no physical union between the betrothed couple. And this was this, as I say, kind of in-between stage, between a very formal engagement, something somewhat more than that, but before the actual marriage.

[5 : 54] If we look in Deuteronomy, in the context of an explanation of different laws and indeed punishments, in Deuteronomy chapter 22, we don't need to read the verses, but you have an occasion there where a betrothed woman is called the wife of the man that she is betrothed to. And that just illustrates how it was very much a formal contract that had been entered into. Now, at this point, even from what we know so far, we can come to some conclusions about Joseph. I think one of the first things that we could legitimately conclude from the evidence before us is that he was a wise man. Now, I'm sure he didn't consider himself a wise man. If you had asked Joseph, well, do you know any wise men? Maybe he would have pointed out to some folk that he knew, perhaps more elderly folk in his village or community, who he knew to be wise, godly men, and he would have said, yes, these are wise men. And if you said, well, what about you? Are you a wise man? I imagine he would have recoiled at the suggestion, no, I'm not a wise man. But I would contend that he was a wise man. And on the basis of certainly one piece of evidence alone, but I think a very weighty piece of evidence, and that is his choice of wife. I think one of the most important decisions a young man can make, and indeed, of course, also a young woman is their choice of wife or husband. And Joseph chooses wisely. He chooses a woman of faith. He chooses a godly woman to be his wife. And that alone is an indication of him being a very wise man. And as we think of that, just one truth concerning Joseph, and begin to draw out some of the lessons for ourselves. Can I direct myself in particular to the young, perhaps also the not so young, but those of you who at some point, maybe even now, but certainly sometime in the future, will be involved in making that choice of a life partner, of a husband, of a wife? And can I urge you to be wise like Joseph? Seek out, if you're a young man, seek out a woman who is godly, who loves God, who is faithful to God.

If you're a young woman, seek out a man with those characteristics. Choose wisely. Marry in the faith. Give due importance to what really matters. Faith in God, commitment to God, coherent discipleship.

It's not only wise to do that, it's the right thing to do. And so, I would urge you in that regard, take Joseph as a worthy example. As your teacher in this matter, he was wise. And we conclude that he was wise because of his wise choice concerning a life partner. But then, of course, as the story continues, we have the bombshell. Matthew describes the circumstances rather discreetly. He says, Now, how did Joseph find out that this had happened? We're not told how Joseph found out. I don't know if you've ever been intrigued by how he may have found out. Presumably, Mary told him. Mary brought the news that she was with a child. Now, when he was first told, I wonder, did Joseph believe the story that he was being told, the account that he was being given? Well, I'm sure he believed that she was pregnant. It's inconceivable that she would have suggested or stated that that was the case. If it wasn't true, what had she to gain to do that? So, he would have believed that it was the case that she was with child. That wouldn't have been something he would have had reason to disbelieve. However shocking and devastating the news was, I'm sure he did believe that. But did he believe this story that it was through the Holy Spirit? What does that mean anyway? I can't imagine. I can't think it's in any way conceivable that he could have believed that to have been the case. Of course, in due course, he comes to believe. But when he first hears, under no possible set of circumstances, in no even imaginary parallel universe, I can't believe Joseph had much time for parallel universes, but to imagine that this was possible, it's just not possible. It's nonsense what he was being told concerning the explanation of Mary being with child. It could be really the only reasonable explanations of her account that he was being told is that she was lying or that she was suffering from some kind of mental delusion. But what does he do? What does he do? And I think in what he does, we also learn more about the kind of man he was. In fact, in verse 19, in the context of what he does, we're actually given a description or there's an adjective describing him. In verse 19, we read, because Joseph, her husband, was a righteous man, having been told the news. We're then told how he responds and it's couch or introduced with this description of him. Indeed, his response is explained by the fact that he was a righteous man. The word here translated righteous would seem to have as its primary significance or meaning is that he was careful in his observance of the law. He was righteous in that sense. He was concerned to be obedient to God's law in a very careful and meticulous way. And so his response to the news that he received from Mary concerning his wife's seeming infidelity would have to be a response that was consistent with a careful observance of the law. That would have to determine and inform how he

responds. Well, what did the law prescribe in these circumstances? Well, I made reference to the passage in Deuteronomy where a betrothed woman is described as a wife. And in that same passage, actually, you're being given the penalties that are to be applied in the case of infidelity. And they're pretty drastic. And indeed, it involves the death of those who have been guilty of such a sin. Now, it seems very much the case that the death penalty, though on the statute book, if you wish, was not applied ordinarily. And so even in this occasion, the chances of it being applied would have been pretty remote. The closest that perhaps Joseph would have been likely to come to a strict application of the letter of the law would have been for Joseph to denounce his wife, his wife-to-be, publicly before a law court and once established her guilt, which wouldn't have been difficult to establish in the circumstances given that she was with child. And in due course, there would have been evidence of that.

proceed to the divorce. That would have been a righteous way to proceed in accordance with the law. And yet, we're told that he proceeded in a different way. Reminding ourselves there of what it says in verse 19, 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. He doesn't want to hurt anybody, doesn't want to humiliate anybody, far less the woman he had hoped to marry and raise a family with.

[14 : 41] And so he chooses another option that was open to him within the context of the law, and that was of a secret divorce. Now, it wouldn't have been totally secret. Some people would have needed to know, but it wouldn't have involved any public fanfare. And as I say, that was one option open to him. It was just, it was righteous, but it was justice moderated by mercy. So, he was being true to what a righteous man should do, but he was also in parallel acting in a way that was merciful. The two were married in his intended action. And I think in this, in Joseph's concern to combine both justice, righteousness, and mercy, we can commend him. Not only do we commend him, but when we observe him acting in this way,

I can oppose the question, who does that remind you all? Someone who was meticulous in observing the law, and yet merciful to the offender, one who was ever concerned to do what was right, and yet ever concerned also to show mercy to those who fell short. Who does that describe? We might say in this case, like son, like father, or maybe we could say like father, like son. As Jesus grew up, the man who, for the years that he was alive, we don't know for how many years that was, he gave him an example that I'm sure Jesus learned from as one who was righteous and merciful and didn't feel the need to choose between the two, but rather married them both. He was a wise man. He was a just man. He was a merciful man. Well, how does that speak to us? How does that challenge us? Is that true of you and me?

Are we those careful to observe the law, even when that's a difficult thing to do, when it would be easier just to pass by or to leave to one side the demands of the law? And yet, are we merciful and compassionate to those who do make mistakes? Of course, that includes us, but especially when others fall short, are we quick to judge and to criticize, or are we merciful and compassionate as Joseph was?

As we read on, we discover another pleasing character trait of Joseph, and that is that he was a prudent man, a self-controlled man. In verse 20, we read, but after he had considered this, you know, what he was to do, an angel of the Lord appeared to him. But even this description of him considering this, it's painting the picture of somebody who says, well, I'm not going to act too quickly or precipitately, and then maybe regret my actions. I'm going to think about this. I'm going to consider what the best thing to do is, and that surely is something that we could all learn from.

We sometimes say in conversation when we're just about to maybe explode or respond or react, we're told to count to a hundred, but sometimes we count to a hundred like children do when they're playing hide and seek. You know, one, two, three, four, five, six, a hundred, because we really don't want to count to a hundred because we want to respond there and then. Maybe you can think of times when you very much regret not having counted slowly to one hundred. Well, Joseph was considered in his actions careful to do the right thing, even when he maybe found it very difficult to know what the right thing was. We need that. Life is full of surprises, sometimes very difficult and unpleasant surprises. People we love disappoint us as we disappoint them. Husbands are unfaithful. Wives are unfaithful. Our sons and daughters often do things that we wish they had not done and get into all kinds of trouble as we do also. Our children make mistakes. They mess up. How do we respond in those circumstances? I think Joseph has much to teach us. But let's move on swiftly to following the encounter. Before the encounter, we find him to be a man who is wise, a man who is just, a man who is merciful, a man who is prudent and self-controlled. What about after, more briefly? Well, in a sense, he's just the same. He's the same man. All the things that were true before his encounter with the angel, of course, are still true after his encounter with the angel. He doesn't change as a person in any essential way as a result of the encounter. But rather what we can see is not so much character traits, but how the man he is is evidenced in what he does. What does he do in response to his encounter?

[19 : 58] And that's what we want to just notice now very briefly. And I think there are three things that Joseph does in response to the encounter that, of course, are a reflection of the kind of man he is.

He listens to God, he believes God, and he obeys God. He listens to God. We've read the account. Of course, God speaks to him through the angel, and he listens to the message that the angel brings him.

Always a wise thing to do, to listen to God. Now, God ordinarily won't speak to us by means of angels, but he speaks to us in and through his word. And we are to be like Joseph, attentive, listening to what God has to say. But Joseph, of course, also believes the message that God brings to him. And, you know, we're familiar with the story, and we maybe think, well, of course he does.

Of course he believes the angel. That's what you've got to do. You've got to believe angels. But when you think of the occasions in the Bible where angels were sent by God to God's people, indeed, devout men and women of God, it's not always the case that their message was believed.

We think of Abraham and Sarah, who didn't believe the message of the angel, indeed, didn't even believe God when he spoke to them. And so I think it's right and legitimate to commend Joseph's faith in believing God's message brought to him through the angel.

[21 : 30] Perhaps even more significantly is that he obeys God's message. We read in verse 24, having been given the message, having been told what he has to do, we read, when Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.

He did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him. We can't overstress the importance of Joseph's obedience. One of the reasons for reading the genealogy, challenging though it is even to read it with all these strange names. But one of the reasons for doing so was just to highlight how Joseph's obedience, in a sense, is so tied to the genealogy. And why do I say that? Because the whole of the genealogy that we've read rested on, in a real sense, on Joseph's obedience. The claim of Jesus to being the son of Abraham and the son of David rested on Joseph obeying because his connection to David and to Abraham was through Joseph's line. If Joseph had not obeyed, and of course we find that inconceivable, and in many ways it is inconceivable, but had he not obeyed, then that would have messed up the whole genealogy, the whole prophetic line that was being followed. It rested on Joseph's obedience. Of course, Joseph did obey, and in that way took his place unwittingly in this great genealogy of redemption where he finds himself. He obeyed the message that he was given.

He listens, he believes, and he obeys. And as we continue finding out a little bit more about Joseph, and there's not much more, but there is a little bit more that we read in the following chapter, in chapter 22, you know, once they're in Bethlehem and the baby is born, and then the angel comes, he receives another message that he has to go to Egypt. What does he do? Well, he immediately goes.

And again, well, we know the story. Of course he goes. And this is difficult for us to imagine, but if you try and imagine, here's this man who has already been so commendable in his obedience, and well, now the baby is born. You might have thought, he'd have thought, well, now things will be quietened down. You know, we can live our life and no longer have all the drama that has accompanied our life so far. You know, the journey to Bethlehem in such difficult circumstances, but no, now he has to go to Egypt. Now, for Joseph, the thought of having to go to Egypt must have been just beyond comprehension. Egypt, what am I going to do in Egypt? And yet, what are we told? He immediately does what he has been commanded to do. And then, of course, the return. At each step of the way, Joseph is marked by this consistent, solid obedience. And in that sense, he does.

He does constitute, and we can rightly take him as one that we can learn from and be challenged by. Our lives as Christians, your life as a Christian, the Christian character of our marriages, of our families, of our homes, the life and mission of our congregation would be very different if we were all characterized by this obedience, if we were all characterized by these actions of Joseph, one who listened to God, one who believed God, one who obeyed God, even in the most trying and confusing of circumstances. I'm sure you all know what it is to be faced in life with a circumstance, a change in direction that was unexpected and unwelcome, and how difficult to be faithful, how difficult to obey God in those circumstances. Well, here we find an ordinary man, but characterized by this kind of solid obedience and practical faith in God. May God help us to be like Joseph.

[25 : 58] Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for your people. We thank you that when we read of a man like Joseph, we're not simply considering a character in history, though indeed he is, but we're thinking of one who is part of the family that we belong to, part of the family of God, one who shares with us a faith in you as the living and true God.

And so we thank you that as we can learn from others who are round about us, as we can in a measure be an example to others, so we can also learn from your people down through the ages and those who are presented to us in the Bible. And we thank you for Joseph. We thank you for his wisdom. We thank you for his righteousness. We thank you for his concern to do the right thing. We thank you for his mercy.

We thank you for his concern to listen to you and to believe what you had to say to him, however unlikely it might have appeared. And we thank you for his solid and consistent obedience to you. Help us by your Spirit as you work in us to be characterized by these traits that ultimately are traits that are found most beautifully and most perfectly in the person of Joseph's son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. And it is in his name that we pray. Amen.