

# The Christmas Family

## Joseph

*Matthew 1:18-25*

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# Joseph

## Scripture

As we approach Christmas this year, I thought that I might have us take a brief look at “The Christmas Family.” Joseph, Mary, and Jesus are the key human persons in the Christmas family.

This past Saturday, Dr. Stephen Clark spoke at our Men’s Breakfast. He spoke about Joseph. It was a marvelous message. I would also like to begin our brief series by looking at Joseph.

So, let’s read about Joseph in Matthew 1:18-25:

**<sup>18</sup> Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. <sup>20</sup> But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:**

**<sup>23</sup> “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel”**

**(which means, God with us). <sup>24</sup> When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, <sup>25</sup> but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus. (Matthew 2:18-25)**

## Introduction

Leonard Bernstein, the famous conductor of the New York

Philharmonic Orchestra, was once asked which instrument was the most difficult to play. He immediately replied, “The second fiddle. I can get plenty of first violinists, but to find someone who can play the second fiddle with enthusiasm—that’s a problem. And if we have no second fiddle, we have no harmony.”<sup>1</sup>

Joseph tends to get lost in the Christmas story because of Mary, Jesus, the angels, the shepherds, the magi, and so many others. But Joseph is a very important character in the Christmas story. He carries out his role so well that he brings a beautiful harmony to the entire Christmas story that we do well to examine.

## Lesson

The actions of Joseph in Matthew 1:18-25 teaches us what it means to trust in the Lord.

Let’s use the following outline:

1. God’s Children Must Temper Justice with Mercy (1:18-19)
2. God Never Forgets Those Who Remember Him (1:20-21)
3. God Is Always at Work in the Lives of His Children (1:22-23)
4. Trusting God Means Obeying God (1:24-25)

### I. **God’s Children Must Temper Justice with Mercy (1:18-19)**

First, God’s children must temper justice with mercy.

Verse 18a says, **“Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph....”** Following the custom of the day, **Mary** may have

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<sup>1</sup> Michael P. Green, ed., *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching: Over 1500 Sermon Illustrations Arranged by Topic and Indexed Exhaustively*, Revised edition of: The expositor’s illustration file. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989).

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been as young as twelve or thirteen years old when she became **betrothed to Joseph**, who could have been an older teenager, perhaps eighteen or nineteen years old.

According to Jewish custom, a betrothal signified much more than an engagement in the modern sense. At that time, a Jewish marriage consisted of two stages, the *kiddushin* (betrothal) and the *huppah* (wedding ceremony). The marriage was almost always arranged by the families of the bride and groom, often without consulting them. A contract was made and was sealed by payment of the *mohar*, the dowry or bride price, which was paid by the groom or his family to the bride's father. The *mohar* served to compensate the father for wedding expenses and to provide a type of insurance for the bride in the event the groom became dissatisfied and divorced her. The contract was considered binding as soon as it was made, and the man and woman were considered legally married, even though the wedding ceremony (*huppah*) and consummation often did not occur until as much as a year later. The betrothal period served as a time of probation and testing of fidelity to ensure that the bride was not carrying anyone else's child. During that period the bride and groom usually had little, if any, social contact with each other.<sup>2</sup>

So **Mary** was in the betrothal stage of her marriage. She was **betrothed to Joseph**, but had not yet had the wedding ceremony. Verse 18b goes on to say, **"...before they came together she was found to be with child...."** Before Mary and Joseph had the wedding ceremony (*huppah*), Mary was discovered to be pregnant.

We know from Luke's Gospel that earlier, perhaps soon after Mary and Joseph were betrothed, the angel Gabriel visited Mary and told her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus" (Luke 1:30-31)

Quite understandably, Mary said to the angel, "How will this

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<sup>2</sup> John MacArthur, *Matthew* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1989), 16.

be, since I am a virgin?”

And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.”

And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”

After the angel left her, Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth, who was now pregnant with John the Baptist. Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home to Nazareth (1:34-40; 1:56).

It is likely that shortly after Mary’s return to Nazareth she began to appear pregnant. That is perhaps when **she was found to be with child**. Joseph must have been crushed. His beloved Mary—pregnant! “*By whom did she become pregnant?*” must have been ringing through his mind. Of course, Mary knew that she was “**with child from the Holy Spirit**” (1:18c). But, as much as she tried to explain it to Joseph, he just could not understand that.

So, “**her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly**” (1:19). Here we learn that **Joseph** was a **just** man. That is, he was a righteous man. Everything we learn about Joseph tells us that he was a devout child of God. Just as Mary loved God, so did Joseph. He had a wholehearted relationship with God.

Moreover, Joseph was **unwilling to put Mary to shame**. He knew that the child was not his. He did not know whose child it was. But, he did not want Mary to be disgraced. Even though he may have wanted to give Mary a second chance, both Roman and Jewish law at that time demanded that he divorce her. Joseph knew that Mary’s chances of ever getting married in that culture were

now ruined. No one would want to marry a girl with a child by an unknown father. He could have taken Mary to court and profited by divorcing her publicly. Or, he could at least have insisted that his dowry be returned to him. But, Joseph simply **resolved to divorce her quietly**. This is justice tempered with mercy.

Sometimes churches will censure a young woman who becomes pregnant, while the father of the child receives no censure at all. Joseph shows us that justice is not merely a matter of shame, but also a matter of mercy. Joseph *had* to divorce Mary, and even though he was personally hurt, he proceeded by tempering justice with mercy.

## **II. God Never Forgets Those Who Remember Him (1:20-21)**

Second, God never forgets those who remember him.

I remember one Sunday at the previous church I served. We had finished the morning Worship Service, and had coffee and conversation with lots of people afterwards. Finally, the last few remaining people went to their cars to go home. At this point, the only people remaining in the narthex were my wife, my children, and myself. Then we noticed that the ten-year old daughter of one of our Ruling Elders was also still at the church. It quickly became clear that each of her parents thought that the other one had their daughter. No big deal. A quick phone call remedied the problem. The little girl was a bit upset, because no one likes to be forgotten.

You would not blame Joseph if he felt forgotten. After all, Mary claimed to have seen an angel. She also claimed that she was “with child from the Holy Spirit” (1:18c). Moreover, Mary said that her relative Elizabeth was also pregnant in her old age, and that an angel had told Elizabeth’s husband Zechariah that Elizabeth would get pregnant. But there is no record of Joseph complaining at all.

In fact, verses 20-21 say that just **“as he [Joseph] considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ ”** God never forgot Joseph. Joseph had continued to demonstrate righteousness and complete devotion to God. So, now was the time for God to reveal to Joseph the part that he was going to play in the life of his Son, Jesus. God affirmed that Mary was indeed pregnant by the Holy Spirit, and that she would bear a son, whose name would be Jesus, which means “He saves.”

Joseph is sometimes called “the forgotten man of the Christmas story.” Joseph loved and worshiped and served God faithfully. God remembered Joseph, and chose him to be Jesus’ earthly father. Joseph, the quiet but strong carpenter, who would be the guiding hand that would equip and prepare the Son of God for his own earthly ministry one day. Joseph’s faithful service to God was not forgotten by God at all.

While God never forgot Joseph, neither did Jesus. It was not uncommon for sons to follow in the footsteps of their fathers, and so Jesus became a carpenter, just like his father. The lessons that Jesus learned from Joseph were carried by Jesus all the way to the cross at Calvary. Though Joseph was an adoptive father, Jesus never forgot that of all the men in the world, God chose Joseph to be his earthly, legal father.

I read a story about a father and his son climbing a mountain. At one point during their climb, it became very difficult and extremely dangerous. The father stopped for a moment to consider the best way forward. Then he heard his son behind him say, “Choose the good path, Dad. I am coming right behind you.” What a great lesson for every dad to remember.

Never forget that just as Jesus followed right behind Joseph,

our children are coming right behind us.

And also keep in mind that God never forgets those who remember him.

### III. God Is Always at Work in the Lives of His Children (1:22-23)

Third, God is always at work in the lives of his children.

One of the most amazing things about Jesus is the number of prophecies that were fulfilled in him. Floyd Hamilton, in *The Basis of Christian Faith*, writes, “Canon Liddon is authority for the statement that there are in the Old Testament 332 distinct predictions which were literally fulfilled in Christ.”<sup>3</sup>

In their book titled *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, Josh and Sean McDowell recognize that after reading through this list, someone might say: “Why, you could find some of these prophecies fulfilled in the deaths of Kennedy, Nasser, King, and other great figures.” And the answer is *yes*, one could possibly find one or two prophecies fulfilled in the lives of other men, but could one person fulfill all of these major prophecies?

Peter Stoner, in the book *Science Speaks*, examines the mathematical probabilities that apply to the fulfillment of these predictions. He writes:

We find that the chance that any man might have lived down to the present time and fulfilled [just] eight prophecies is 1 in  $10^{17}$  [That would be 1 with 17 zeroes after the one. In order to help us comprehend this staggering probability, Stoner illustrates it by supposing that] we take  $10^{17}$  silver dollars and lay them on the face of Texas. They will cover all of the state two feet deep. Now mark one of these silver dollars and stir the whole mass thoroughly, all over the state. Blindfold a man and tell him that he can travel as far as he wishes, but he must pick up one silver dollar

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Josh McDowell and Sean McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict: Life-Changing Truth for a Skeptical World* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2017), n. p.

and say that this is the right one. What chance would he have of getting the right one? Just the same chance that the prophets would have had of writing these eight prophecies and having them all come true in any one man, from their day to the present time, providing they wrote them according to their own wisdom.<sup>4</sup>

In about 735 BC, the Prophet Isaiah wrote these words in Isaiah 7:14, “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.” Perhaps as Joseph pondered the angel’s words to him, he thought of Isaiah’s prophecy. So, almost 800 years later, Matthew wrote in verses 22-23 say, **“All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ‘Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel’ (which means, God with us).”**

Joseph and Mary were two young teenagers in love. They each loved God, and they were betrothed to one another. They were committed to obeying God in every area of their lives. At this point, God’s providence was strange to them. But they believed that God is always at work in the lives of his children.

As you go through your daily life, as you seek to honor God above all else, as Joseph did, believe that God is always at work in your life too. You may not understand what God is doing. You may not see how God is glorifying himself for your ultimate good, but continue to trust that God is at work in your life.

#### **IV. Trusting God Means Obeying God (1:24-25)**

And fourth, trusting God means obeying God.

We read in verses 24-25, **“When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And**

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<sup>4</sup> Josh McDowell and Sean McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict: Life-Changing Truth for a Skeptical World*, n. p.

**he called his name Jesus.”** This is another confirmation of the righteousness of Joseph. As soon as he understood the command of God, which was given through the angel in his dream, he obeyed the Lord. Joseph’s desire was to do the will of his heavenly Father. What a great model for Jesus to see as he grew up in Joseph’s home. We know that Jesus’s supreme desire was to do the will of his heavenly Father. Jesus had a flesh and blood model to see as he grew up in Nazareth.

I once heard Gordon MacDonald say, “Delayed obedience is disobedience.” In Joseph we see immediate obedience to the command of God. There was no delay in his obedience at all.

For some time, educators have faced accusations of “dumbing down” exams in order to compensate for increasingly poor student performances.

The Professional Association of Teachers (PAT) in Great Britain, however, recently proposed another solution: banning the word “fail” from classrooms and replacing it with the phrase, “deferred success.” Eliminating negative language, a spokesman for the group said, would help avoid the lasting educational problems associated with the labeling of pupils.<sup>5</sup>

Too many today think in terms of “deferred obedience” or “delayed obedience.” They read any one of God’s commands, and there is no sense of immediate obedience. And then they wonder why their Christian lives sometimes are in a mess.

As you look at the lives of biblical heroes, one feature you will notice is their obedience to God. Oh, to be sure, they sometimes sinned, but then you see that they also repented. They understood that they were the recipients of God’s grace and mercy, and so they demonstrated their trust for God by their obedience to God. Make a commitment today to demonstrate your trust in God by your obedience to him.

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<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2005/november/16206.html>.

## Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed life of Joseph as set forth in Matthew 1:18-25, let us trust our Lord in every circumstance of life.

Joseph, the forgotten man in the Christmas story, the second fiddle, is a wonderful example of trusting the Lord in every circumstance of life. Initially, he had no clue about all that was happening to Mary and Elizabeth and Zechariah. But, because of his love and devotion for God, he trusted him in every circumstance.

John Bisagno, whose material has shaped this message, wrote that he once boarded a plane in Missouri. The temperature was dropping, and it had snowed all night. The flight was delayed for quite some time, and they finally boarded the plane, only to sit on the runway as the plane was de-iced several times. When they finally took off the visibility was poor, and he remembers hoping the pilot could see more outside his window than John could see outside his own. But, just ten minutes into the flight they broke through the clouds. Suddenly all the darkness was gone, and the sun was shining so brightly no one would have ever dreamed they had just left the sleet and snow behind.<sup>6</sup>

God is supreme and rules over all things. In a sense, he works in the sunlight of his radiant glory. When the angel came to Joseph, things looked dark and dismal for Joseph. But God had a plan for his loving, faithful, trusting servant.

So, no matter where you find yourself today, believe that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28, *NIV*). Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> John R. Bisagno, *Principle Preaching: How to Create and Deliver Purpose Driven Sermons for Life Applications* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2002), 118–119.

# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church  
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and membership in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike maturity,  
equip them for their ministry in the church  
and life mission in the world,  
in order to magnify God's name.*

## Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can  
be found at:

1. [www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons](http://www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons).
2. [www.sermoncentral.com/contributors/freddy-fritz-sermons-11181.asp](http://www.sermoncentral.com/contributors/freddy-fritz-sermons-11181.asp).
3. [www.sermonaudio.com/source\\_detail.asp?sourceid=Fred-dyFritz](http://www.sermonaudio.com/source_detail.asp?sourceid=Fred-dyFritz).

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