

**MATTHEW 1:18–25.** (EHV)

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. His mother, Mary, was pledged in marriage to Joseph. Before they came together, she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. Joseph, her husband, was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her. So he decided to divorce her privately. But as he was considering these things, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because the child 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.” All this happened to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Look, the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son. And they will name him Immanuel,” which means, “God with us.” When Joseph woke up from his sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him. He took Mary home as his wife, but he was not intimate with her until she gave birth to her firstborn son. And he named him Jesus.

Joseph is often the overlooked member of the Christmas story. To a certain extent, that’s understandable. It is precisely because Jesus is the son of a *virgin* that he is both natural and supernatural, the Son of Man and the Son of God, and that he was conceived and born without sin.

But overall, it’s unfortunate if we overlook Joseph. In a country and culture that glorifies independent, single mothers, it’s important for us to note that God deliberately did not have Mary raise Jesus on her own. Every child needs a father, and from a human standpoint, so did Jesus. And Joseph was the man God chose to serve as Jesus’s earthly father.

And God chose Joseph to be his Son’s earthly father because God had formed Joseph to be the kind of man that we see here, the man who prepared for Jesus’s first coming in a godly way. In seeing how Joseph prepared for Jesus’s first coming, we see traits that are just as vital and beneficial for us to have as we prepare for Jesus’s second coming.

This morning let’s prepare for Jesus’s coming with Joseph.

**1. Listening to God’s Word**

The first way Joseph prepares for Jesus’s coming is by listening to God’s word. In fact, Joseph would not have been prepared for Jesus’s coming into the world if he had not listened to God’s word. Joseph was betrothed to a young woman from his same hometown, Nazareth in Galilee. Betrothal was a little different than our modern practice of engagement, because the ceremony of betrothal took place in front of witnesses and had legal status. One you were betrothed, the woman referred to the man as her husband and the man referred to the woman as his wife, and breaking the betrothal required a certificate of divorce. However, the couple did not yet live together and they were not intimate with each other. The husband was supposed to be busy preparing a life for his wife and both were preparing for the eventual multi-day wedding feast. Imagine if the wedding service on the one hand and the wedding reception and beginning of the honeymoon on the other hand were separated by a year’s time, and you begin to have an idea of the relationship between betrothal and marriage back then.

So Joseph was betrothed and had begun making arrangements for his and Mary's life together. Then Joseph heard that Mary had decided to go down to the hill country of Judah for an extended visit with her relative Elizabeth; perhaps she even told Joseph before she left. But when she came back three months later, she was visibly pregnant.

If you were in Joseph's shoes, and you knew you had never been intimate with Mary, what would you have every right to think? Joseph not only had every right to be angry at Mary for her infidelity, but also to make a public example of her in divorcing her. But that isn't the kind of man Joseph was. For one thing, he was a godly and gentle man, and so he was more hurt and heartbroken than he was angry. For another, he may have been confused that Mary kept insisting that she had not been intimate with any other man and that she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit and the power of the Most High. He knew Mary as a pious young woman who didn't lie, yet he also knew that that wasn't how women got pregnant. So he just decided to divorce her quietly and move on with his life.

"But as he was considering these things, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because the child 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.'" Joseph listened to God's word, and in listening to God's word, his mistaken notions about what was going on were corrected and he was prevented from making the wrong decision. And he didn't just listen to the angel; he eventually also listened to the Old Testament and the passage from Isaiah that Matthew goes on to cite: "Look, the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son. And they will name him Immanuel," which means, "God with us."

As we await Jesus's second coming, we too need to listen to God's word. God doesn't promise that any angel is going to appear to us. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that God spoke to our forefathers like that "in the past," but now he speaks to us by his Son. We have everything we need for this life and the next here in God's word, both the Old and New Testaments. We need to listen to that, so that our mistaken notions are corrected and we are prevented from making the wrong decisions and perhaps having to live with them eternally.

At a job I worked at during summers while enrolled in college, one of my coworkers once shared with me a domestic problem he was having and said, "I haven't read the Bible a lot. I do know it says God helps those who help themselves." The one thing he thought was in the Bible isn't in the Bible. He needed to listen to God's word like Joseph.

A few months ago, in preparing for a conference paper on a portion of Romans, I found that I had notions about the relationship between the current heavens and earth and the new heavens and earth that God is creating for us to enjoy eternally that needed to be corrected. There have also recently been some good, specific warnings for pastors in the devotional book my wife and I have been reading that I needed to be reminded of. I need to listen to God's word like Joseph.

It's a popular idea today that a book or other spoken or written content is good, or that a friend is a good friend, if they affirm who you are and make you feel good about yourself and confirm all the thoughts, opinions, feelings, and ideas that you currently have. That's a mistaken notion that will lead you to make many wrong decisions. People with that notion need to listen to God's word like Joseph.

There are mistaken notions that are popular in the church—for instance, the notion that if you're an official member of a Christian church, you're going to heaven, regardless of what you actually believe in your heart, or whether your faith is regularly fed with God's word, or whether you are living a life of repentance and are striving to keep God's commandments. There's a similar notion about those who receive a Christian funeral. Many think it doesn't matter what the person believed or what the person's life looked like while he or she was alive; they received a Christian funeral, so they must be in heaven, they think. Then there's the notion that sins against the Second Table of the Law, like murder, adultery, and stealing, are more serious than sins against the First Table of the Law, like cursing, taking God's name in vain, having a casual attitude toward church attendance, or teaching or believing false doctrine. These notions will lead to making wrong life decisions that could very well have eternal consequences. People with these notions need to listen to God's word like Joseph. And if we don't have those notions, we need to listen to God's word like Joseph so that we don't fall for them in the future.

Prepare for Jesus's coming with Joseph by listening to God's word.

## **2. Believing God's Word**

But don't just listen to God's word. Believe what it says. "When Joseph woke up from his sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him." He did what the angel commanded him because he believed what the angel told him. He believed God's word.

How could he believe such a message? How could he believe that what was conceived in his betrothed wife was conceived by the Holy Spirit?

He could believe it because the gospel is powerful, and because Joseph listened, he heard the gospel in the angel's message: "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." Salvation from sins through a child who is both God and man! That's what God had promised in his word. That's what Joseph needed more than anything else.

And now, as evidence of the fact that God was planning to save his people from their sins, as evidence of the fact that God was kindly disposed towards sinful mankind, Joseph hears from the angel that, in spite of his own sinfulness, in spite of his false notions, in spite of the fact that he had decided to do the wrong thing, he will have the privilege of serving as the earthly father of this God-man. Joseph listened to God's word, and Joseph believed God's word. And when he believed God's word, he was prepared for Jesus's coming.

As we await Jesus's second coming, we too need to believe God's word. Those who do not believe God's word will be punished with everlasting destruction when he comes.

But how can we believe this Word? How can we believe that a virgin conceived when, if it happened, that's the only time in history that it happened? How can we believe that this man was conceived by the Holy Spirit? How can we believe that God the all-powerful, who needs nothing, would condescend to take on human flesh and be a part of his own creation and subject himself to his own laws? How can we believe that he is both 100% God and 100% man in one person? How can we believe what Luther himself once said sounds "like fables"?

Because this is the message of our salvation, and this good news is powerful—that's how. The Son of God took on human flesh precisely because he came to save all humans from their sins, including us. And precisely because he came to save us from our sins, it doesn't matter how

many false notions we've had, or how horrible. It doesn't matter how many wrong decisions we've made, or how bad their consequences. He wants to be your Savior and mine. He wants to dwell in your heart and mine. "Don't be afraid," Jesus says. "Don't be afraid that what you've done is too horrible for my grace. It's not. Don't be afraid of what a fool you'll look like in the eyes of the world. I will be with you and will help and strengthen you. Don't be afraid; only believe, and be saved."

Prepare for Jesus's coming with Joseph by believing God's word.

### **3. Doing God's Word**

But don't just listen to God's word, like Joseph did. Don't just believe God's word, like Joseph did. Also do what God's word says, like Joseph did. That's in fact how we know that Joseph believed God's word, isn't it? The angel told him, "Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus." And what did Joseph do? "He took Mary home as his wife, but he was not intimate with her until she gave birth to her firstborn son. And he named him Jesus."

If the Scriptures said, "But when Joseph got up, he divorced Mary quietly, and he had nothing to do with her or her child for the rest of his life," and I said, "But he still believed the angel's message in his heart," you would rightly call me a fool. When you believe something, your actions naturally reflect it. You cannot say someone believes something if their actions do not reflect it.

This is perhaps the greatest praise we can give Joseph. Both here with Jesus's birth, and later when Joseph was told to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt and then eventually to bring them back, all three times Joseph does exactly as God's word tells him to do. That's how we know he believed God's word.

So too, James tells us, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says" (1:22). Don't listen to God's word and come to the Lord's Supper and then continue to hold your false notions and continue to make bad, sinful decisions. If you think that doesn't matter, imagine yourself the moment Jesus returns. When you hear the trumpet call and the voice of the archangel, what do you want to be looking up from? Your fourth beer? An obscene picture on your phone screen? A movie portraying godless activity? Just sitting there lazily? Your pillow on Sunday morning? In any of those scenarios, do you imagine Judgment Day going well for you? Faith in Jesus is a living and active thing, so let it be living and active within you. Battle against temptation and sin. Live in repentance from sin; after all, you have a Savior from sin. And with God's help and blessing, think and say and do the things that are pleasing to him.

Prepare for Jesus's coming with Joseph by doing God's word.

What an example of preparation Joseph is for us! Let it be our prayer that we would prepare for Jesus's coming as he did—by listening to God's word, by believing God's word, and by doing God's word. God grant it for the sake of his Son, who has saved us from our sins. Amen.