

The Cloud of Witnesses

Joseph of Nazareth

Lesson 1: Joseph of Nazareth – A Man Of Faith, Grace And Strength

Reading

Matthew 1:16-25.

A Man Of Faith, Grace And Strength

Joseph must have been an amazing man. A devout Jew who wanted nothing more than to follow the ways of Moses and God. He had even found a wonderful young woman, called Mary, and together they were looking forward to getting married and spending the rest of their lives together. They were engaged.

They had set themselves apart for each other and wouldn't have dreamed of violating that sacred union by succumbing to promiscuous behaviour or pre-marital sex. Mary was a virgin.

We can hardly imagine the emotional turmoil that must have gripped Joseph when Mary told him that she was pregnant. No matter how Mary explained it away – she was pregnant and they were not married. Such a thing was unthinkable. He had been hit by something bigger and more painful than a huge 4 x 2 piece of wood.

It was all the more difficult to deal with since he couldn't expect anyone to understand or believe the explanation. Mary had not been rebellious, she had not fallen for a one-night stand, or forsaken Joseph for someone else – she was pregnant through the work of the Holy Spirit. But who would believe her or Joseph? How could they prove that it was the work of the Holy Spirit?

Joseph was forced to make a decision about something that was not his fault or of his making – it had been thrust upon him, and it was completely outside his scheme of reference. But he would have to make a choice. He could divorce Mary – and expose her to embarrassment, ridicule, censure, being ostracised and probable physical death, or get married to cover up any further embarrassment.

His initial reaction was to divorce her as quietly as possible and to protect her as much as possible – but God intervened. Joseph had a dream and God told him to marry Mary since she was telling the truth, and the baby she was carrying had indeed been conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit and would be the longed-for promised Messiah.

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Lesson 1 continued: Joseph of Nazareth – A Man Of Faith, Grace And Strength

However, marrying Mary wouldn't be straightforward. Joseph would have to bear the presumption of misbehaviour. He would have to convince himself that Mary was telling the truth. He would have to put up with any misguided criticism from family and friends. He would be married but forbidden to enjoy conjugal rights until after Jesus was born. He would become a father within 9 months of marriage with all that entailed.

Over and above all that, he would become the human trustee of the most precious baby ever born – a parent to the Son of God. Someone who would be responsible for training up the Messiah in the Jewish culture of the day and in the ways of God. Joseph must have looked at the responsibilities and thought it an impossible task.

Yet we read that he was completely obedient to what the Lord said. He took Mary as his wife, he didn't have sexual intercourse with her until after the baby was born, and he gave the baby the name – Jesus – given by God.

What an amazing man.

Joseph of Nazareth would say to us today...

The Christian life is a walk of faith. God may ask you to do unusual or seemingly risky things but He will always give you the grace to do it if you are willing and obedient.

Prayer

Father, as I consider all that You asked Joseph to do, I realise that he made some awesome choices. Please help me to be willing to be completely obedient to Your will for my life, and then may I receive the grace and strength that Joseph knew. Amen.

Additional readings

Proverbs 4; Ephesians 1:3-14; Galatians 5:22-26.

Questions

What were some of the challenges Joseph faced as the custodian of the Son of God?

How should we treat the children God has entrusted to us?

How do you regard the 'little people' in your family and your extended family?

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Lesson 2: Joseph of Nazareth – Received A Visit From The Eastern Nobles

Reading

Matthew 2:1-12.

Received A Visit From The Eastern Nobles

Joseph and Mary lived in Northern Israel – in Nazareth. However, the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus decreed that a census should be taken, and one of the requirements was that each family had to return to its geographical roots. Joseph and Mary's people came from Bethlehem in Judea, so they had to make the journey south, even though by this time Mary was heavily pregnant.

Bethlehem was primarily famous for being King David's home and Joseph and Mary were descendants of David. Remember, the prophet Micah had foretold that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem. Bethlehem itself means – house of Bread, and later Jesus claimed to be the Bread of Life.

I wonder when it first struck home to Mary and Joseph – Mary was pregnant with the Messiah but they were living in Nazareth – yet the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. They had no plans to move south. They were happily settled and getting ready to celebrate the birth of their firstborn – a son. One of the greatest privileges for a Jewish couple was the birth of their firstborn and if it happened to be a boy, the whole family would be there to celebrate it in style.

That would not be realised for Mary and Joseph because they would have to leave their neighbours and friends and move south to Bethlehem. Whilst it was the home of their ancestors, the place was thronged with visitors. Everyone who claimed to be a descendant of king David was there. Consequently, the tourist and family accommodation was exhausted.

The only place left was a cave in the back garden. And it was in that exposed cave used to shelter animals in winter and in a crude trough used for animal feed that Jesus, the Saviour of the World, was laid.

It was into that scene that the Magi came – those Eastern nobles. They came from Iraq to worship a King. They were not only nobles but also probably priests who studied philosophy and natural science, including astronomy. They watched the stars and would have noticed anything different from the natural sequence of the moon's phases and alignment of the stars.

They journeyed to Jerusalem to find the King, expecting Herod to know. But he had to ask the religious leaders who found that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Herod therefore sent them on their way with a request to be told where he could go and also worship the new king.

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Lesson 2 cont.: Joseph of Nazareth – Received A Visit ...

We always think of three kings or nobles – probably because of the three gifts they gave. Gold, incense and myrrh. I love those gifts. I believe God made them give those gifts as His way of revealing to the world that His Son had arrived.

Gold for a King. Representing truth, purity and priceless value.

Incense for a Priest. Representing the fact that He is God. Incense is used in worship. Jesus is worthy of our worship.

Myrrh for a Saviour. Myrrh used in embalming the dead. Jesus would die to make a relationship with God possible.

Yes, through those gifts, God the Father showed for all to see that Jesus was the Son of God – the Way, the Truth and the Life, and the only Saviour of the world.

The Magi came not to see Joseph and Mary; they came to see Jesus. But how did Joseph feel? Jealous? I don't think so. I expect he was overwhelmed. All he believed about Jesus was now open for all to know and accept.

Joseph of Nazareth would say to us today...

When Jesus comes into your life all else fades into insignificance. Yes, the Eastern nobles came – but not to see Mary and me – they came to see Jesus. When we saw what Jesus meant to them, it re-enforced our love and devotion to Him.

Prayer

Father, please help us remember that we are to worship the One lying in the manger – not the cave, not the manger, not His earthly parents, not even the baby – but the Son of God. May we never forget those gifts were given to declare His mission, His glory and who He really is. Amen.

Additional readings

Psalm 24; 1 Kings 10:1-13; Matthew 21:1-11; Revelation 3:20.

Questions

As you consider Jesus today, will you think of Him as the baby in the manger or the Son of God?

What is your best memory of Christmas Day 2007?

Of the 3 gifts given by the Magi – which would you have given? How would you have felt if you had been chosen to give the gift of myrrh?

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Lesson 3: Joseph of Nazareth – The Protector Of His Family

Reading

Matthew 2:13-18.

The Protector Of His Family

Joseph was only a man; yet he had a divine responsibility – to look after and protect the Messiah. Yes, Jesus was born to die but at God's appointed time; not before, nor at Herod's invention.

Yes, Joseph had help. He had a dream where he learned that Herod wanted to kill Jesus and so he would have to take Mary and Jesus away to Egypt. But he still had to work out the logistics and the way. He had to be resourceful and resilient.

He had to convince Mary that the move was inevitable for their safety, and he had to arrange transport and food. He also had to decide where to live in Egypt. I guess Joseph was able to use some of the gift of gold for their immediate needs.

Consider how Joseph must have felt. Everything started to go mad after he and Mary got engaged. First she became pregnant – not by him and not within their future goals timeline. Then before the baby was born they had to leave their new home and travel all the way down to Bethlehem. Once they arrived there, they found all the normal accommodation had been secured, and all they were left with was an outside cave hewn out of the rock face. No beds to lie on – just hay and a manger food trough to lay their firstborn. No family celebration, just a cold lonely delivery.

Then, out of the blue, some shepherds arrived, exclaiming that they had seen angels who told them to come and see the new Saviour. After that, things seemed to settle down a bit when, again without warning, Iraqi magi arrived and gave Jesus some incredible gifts, saying Jesus was a king. They had only just gone when Joseph had the dream warning him of Herod's evil intent.

Once more they were forced back on the road. Not this time to return to their Nazareth home, but onwards as desperate fugitive refugees from their troubled homeland. I'm sure Joseph could have been forgiven for thinking that God had a funny way of welcoming His Son into the world. He may even have felt God had given him a near impossible task – that of protecting the Messiah whilst on earth.

One thing must have become very clear to Joseph – the enemy was out to kill Jesus. Whilst being in Egypt, no doubt Mary and Joseph learned about Herod's murdering of the children in Israel in his insane pursuit to kill his perceived rival. Satan will use any and all means to destroy us and our families. We see evidence all around us. We dare not put our heads in the sand and hope the reality will go away – it won't. We have to stand up for our families and protect them at all costs.

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Lesson 3 continued: Joseph of Nazareth – The Protector Of His Family

Even in the passage we have considered here, the challenges that Joseph faced and the way he chose to face them, persevering at all costs, prove that he was a person of strong character and faith. Someone who had a simple faith in God. If God said it – I believe it – that settles it. I must do what He says and go where He tells me. It's for our good and for our safety.

Let God challenge you as you read this today. What are the character traits we have seen in Joseph that God wants us to show?

Joseph of Nazareth would say to us today...

We need to wake up to the fact that there is a war on. The enemy is out to destroy your family. Make sure you take all the practical steps you can to protect it.

Prayer

Father, I am amazed at what Joseph, Mary and Jesus had to endure in the first few years of their life as a family. Please forgive me for being so self-centred. Please help me realise that no matter who we are we are going to face challenges and hardship, and that the enemy Satan is trying to destroy our family. Please grant us your strength and wisdom to do all we can to protect it. Amen.

Additional readings

Genesis 45:1-11; Psalm 91; Acts 23:11-35; Nehemiah 4:6-15.

Questions

In what ways is the enemy trying to attack your family?

What are you doing to defend your family?

What would cause you to shift home or change your children's school?

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Lesson 4: Joseph of Nazareth – The Provider For His Family

Reading

Matthew 2:19-23.

The Provider For His Family

Eventually, an angel told Joseph it was clear to leave Egypt and to return to Israel. I wonder how Joseph felt. I wonder if he wanted to return or whether the past was a bad and painful memory – one that he hoped would just go away and be lost behind a new life in Egypt. Whatever his thoughts, he obeyed the angel and set out for his homeland – Israel.

The day arrived when they would leave their temporary lodgings and set out for their new adventure. Where would they live? What would they do? Where would they find new friends? Which synagogue would they attend? All the usual questions people face when shifting from one place to another. It would appear from the passage that Joseph had intended to return to Bethlehem – where Jesus was born – their ancestral home.

However, when He learned that Herod's son, Archelaus, had assumed the Herodian throne, he wisely chose to go Galilee – as far away as he could from the influence of that family. So Joseph, Mary and Jesus returned to Nazareth, and Joseph returned to his normal employment in order to provide for his family.

Being a Christian is not necessarily easy. Neither does it require you to pretend things are different than they are. God has given us a brain and He expects us to use it. Sometimes He expects us to move away from danger. Even in the Lord's prayer Jesus said, *"lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one."*

God does not expect to have to provide for us supernaturally all the time. Once the Hebrews had entered the Promised Land, the Manna stopped. Yes, there is a time when God will and does protect us supernaturally, however, most of the time, He expects us to use our talents and our creativity to provide the necessary income for our survival. Nevertheless, God has promised to be our Provider – how He does that is up to Him, but normally it is through our job and position at work.

The next era in the family history seems to be very boring in the light of what went before, however, it was not a time when nothing happened. The family grew in more ways than one. Jesus grew up and began working with Joseph, learning the trade and mastering the tools of the trade. He learned obedience to his parents, discipline in education and employment. He learned the Torah off by heart, like his peers.

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Lesson 4 continued: Joseph of Nazareth – The Provider For His Family

The family also grew by the addition of siblings – James, Joseph, Simon, and Jude together with his sisters. Quite a family. All that time, Jesus, being the eldest, would have had responsibilities, and Joseph would have taught Him many things.

It's very hard for us to put ourselves back into that situation where the Creator God – Eternal Word – became flesh and dwelt among us. It's hard trying to get our minds around the humanity of Jesus, isn't it? I wonder how Joseph managed. Did he expect Jesus to know everything, and so find himself checking every word so it didn't seem condescending? Or did he go about life, just like you and me, allowing Jesus to copy what he did? (The things he did right anyway!)

Joseph of Nazareth would say to us today...

God has given each one of us gifts and talents He expects us to use to help provide an income for our family. God does not despise the work of our hands – Jesus, like me, worked with his hands in the building trade. God does sometimes provide supernaturally, but most times He uses what we are good at and the things we enjoy.

Prayer

Thank you Father for providing me with the job I have in order to provide the necessary finance for those I care for. Help me work at it to the best of my ability and so be the best witness I can for You. Amen.

Additional readings

Luke 4:14-30; Acts 19:23-31; Colossians 3:12-17; Genesis 22:14.

Questions

Why has God given us a brain?

What has God gifted you to do?

In what ways has God proved to you that He is your provider?

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Lesson 5: Joseph of Nazareth – The Spiritual Leader Of The Family

Reading

Luke 2:21-40.

The Spiritual Leader Of The Family

Joseph and Mary were steeped in Jewish tradition, handed down from generation to generation. They chose to continue those traditions even in the face of adversity. However, what amazing experiences they would have missed had they chosen to ignore them. They would have missed both Simeon and Joanna's prophecies, which must have given them so much unexpected encouragement.

Traditions and habits have negative connotations these days, don't they? Yet, there are good traditions and good habits. Traditions often help build community and certainly help build strong relationships within a family. No doubt you remember the Christmas traditions your family enjoyed in the past. Researchers tell us that where there are strong traditions in the family, the children tend to be more well-rounded and able to adjust to change.

In fact, they encourage us to establish our own family traditions. Traditions don't have to be expensive – like spending Christmas in Hawaii every year – more like switching off the TV or Xbox for a hour, and each family member sharing the highlight of the previous year. Or having a family meal once a month, even when all the kids have grown up and have families of their own.

There are good habits as well as bad habits. It used to be the habit to go to church every Sunday – now it seems it is to the shopping mall instead.

However, good habits are only of benefit when parents and children do it together. For example – if you think your children would benefit from attending church – don't just send them; attend church with them – otherwise, they will become confused, and they will be turned off.

In our fast-paced world that focuses so much on the pursuit of money and self-achievement, it is so easy to ignore Eternity and forget that this world is not all there is to life.

As parents and leaders, we should constantly keep before us the fact that we are pilgrims on a journey, which has its climax, not on earth, but in Eternity. Consequently, we should be forming habits and traditions within our sphere of influence, which will prepare our children and followers for that even greater experience of Eternity.

Most young people are looking desperately for something which is worth spending their lives on – something greater than things and temporary enticements, money or even awards – these things

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Lesson 5 continued: Joseph of Nazareth – The Spiritual Leader Of The Family

all tarnish in time and can leave an empty void. When that happens, our souls cry out for something far greater. Creating a habit of considering Eternity is well worth the investment.

Having Eternity as our vision and goal will enable us to live more effectively and securely while on earth. It will enable us to choose values, which transcend the urgent and absorb the important. It will enable us to consider others, rather than just concentrating on ourselves and our happiness. If we are truly to benefit humanity and the society in which we live, we need to live for a cause greater than ourselves and be prepared to give our lives for what we hold dear.

Joseph of Nazareth would say to us today...

You have a responsibility to spiritually lead and guide your family. Your children will follow your lead. They will copy whatever you do or don't do. Think about it.

Prayer

Father, please help us remember that we are the ones our children will use as their primary role models. Help us be consistent, real and vulnerable. Help us also to try and establish good eternal values in our lives so that we pass on good eternal values to our children. Amen.

Additional readings

Deuteronomy 6:1-12; Genesis 6:8-7:1; Joshua 24:14-31.

Questions

What do you do to show that you are the spiritual leader of your family?

How could you improve?

What spiritual legacy are you currently modelling to your family?

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Lesson 6: Joseph of Nazareth – Modelled Earthly Fatherhood

Reading

Luke 2:41-52.

Modelled Earthly Fatherhood

Joseph and Mary continued the custom of going to the Temple every year for the Feast of Passover. They made that commitment to God and to their family. It was on one of those journeys, presumably for something like what would be called today – His bar-mitzvah, that Jesus got lost.

Actually, it wasn't Jesus who got lost, but His parents who mislaid Him. Jesus was, as He told His parents, in His Father's house and going about His Father's business – just as they should have expected.

However, I want us to consider the next 18 years of silence. We read in our passage that *"then He went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them."* The next highlight we have of Jesus is when He was baptised by John, when He was about 30 years old.

So what happened in between? There has been much speculation. However, I will not get drawn into that. The Biblical record leaves it that He went home and did what He was told by His parents.

He had a normal upbringing. He lived at home, played with His siblings and learned a trade – His father's trade – building.

Just consider Joseph for a moment. If you think parenthood is difficult – try being the earthly father entrusted with raising the Son of God – Jesus. How would you go about it? Wishing you had been more attentive at the synagogue and learned the Torah in a lot more detail? Wishing you had been a scribe, rather than a carpenter?

What would you decide to teach Jesus? Sit him down with every religious book you could get your hands on and say – read those, they may help you? Try and teach Him the names of all the trees, plants, flowers and birds you can remember?

Then you would remember that He had created the world – and you – so there was no point in doing anything, anyway. Add to that, the fact that Jesus was perfect. Would you get frustrated, jealous and angry?

Whatever Joseph did and for however long he did it, would appear to have been simple, straightforward and consistent. He probably came to the conclusion very early on that he would just have to be himself and live accordingly. So he made the decision that there would be no

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Lesson 6 continued: Joseph of Nazareth – Modelled Earthly Fatherhood

pretence, but faithfulness and integrity. He carried on just as he had dealt with the challenges he faced with Mary from the very beginning of their relationship.

We all face similar challenges – because every child that is born is a gift from God, whom He entrusts to our care. It truly is an awesome privilege and responsibility. Our job is to take that privilege seriously, and consider the best way we can fulfil that role, never forgetting that in the end, we have to let them go and make their own decisions and way in life.

The Bible says, "*Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men.*" Joseph must have been a good role model, despite his humanity. So can you.

Joseph of Nazareth would say to us today...

You are allowed to ask God for help. He has a parental instinct over every child He entrusts to us. He is their Heavenly Father – we are just the trustees of our children until they earn their independence. Whatever you sow into their lives – they will reap.

Prayer

Father, I hadn't realised what an awesome privilege it is to be a father/parent to a child. Please help me to fulfil that calling with all Your help so that those to whom I am a father/parent will also grow in wisdom, stature, and in favour with You and others. Amen.

Additional readings

Psalm 103; Ephesians 6:1-18; Philippians 4:4-13.

Questions

How does God expect earthly parents to look after their (His) children?

In what ways are you investing in your children?

What principles are you teaching your children to espouse by your current lifestyle?