

**Series: Fear Not!**

## **“Overcoming Fear Through Obedience”**

### **Matthew 1:18-25**

Today we are continuing a series of sermons that focus on Christmas. Sometimes we need to be reminded that what happened 2,000 years ago still matters today. What God did in sending His Son as a gift radically changed our world and ultimately can even change our lives. As we study the unchanging truths of God becoming man and coming to this fallen world, I pray that we will get a fresh glimpse of what His coming meant then and what it means to us today. Specifically, as we continue to look at these passages I want us to realize that we have much in common with the people that we will read about. They aren't just characters with names and facts about them. They were people who faced experiences and felt various emotions just like you and me. We are told by the so-called experts that there are four basic emotions that all humans experience – happiness, sadness, anger, and fear. Without question, the characters that we read about faced these various emotions. The emotion we will see clearly present in each of the accounts of Scripture is the feeling of fear. On each occasion we see that the sudden presence of an angel accompanied with the message that he shared brought fear. And on each occasion the angel gave a specific word of instruction and encouragement – “Fear Not!” In other words, don't be afraid.

Can you relate to this today? Are you dealing with fear? Do you find yourself worrying and fretting over things that you can't fix, change, or prevent? What fears are affecting you? The problem with fear is that it affects us far more than just emotionally. It affects us biologically as our heart beats faster, our breathing speeds up, we begin to sweat, our muscles tense, our mouth gets dry, and our stomach is in knots. It affects us mentally as our mind races and seems to play games on us. The fear of a given situation can paralyze us mentally and place great barriers that hinder us from effective action. And ultimately, fear also affects us spiritually. It can prevent us from trusting God. It can prevent us from obeying Him. It causes us to be stuck on the “What ifs” of life. What if I give up total control? What if this doesn't work the way that I want it to? What if everything falls apart? What if? Our fears can rob us of the blessings that come through obedience. It can cause us to even doubt God. God doesn't want us to be a people governed by fear. In fact, over and over again in His Word we are told, “Do not be afraid.” We see this reminder in each of the passages that we read this month.

Two weeks ago, we studied how God sent an angel to Zacharias to declare that he would have a son who would be the forerunner to the Savior. We saw how Zacharias responded to God and learned how we can overcome fear through faith. Last week, we then fast-forwarded six months to the next message that God sent through the angel to a teenage girl named Mary. From her we learned that we can overcome fear by surrendering to God. Today we move forward another 3 months, at least, in the narrative to learn from a man named Joseph. From his experience we will learn a third powerful key to overcoming fear – Obedience.

Read Text

I believe that there is much that we can learn today from the example of this man named Joseph. Joseph seemed like a very unlikely candidate to have become so famous. Truthfully, I think Joseph would be a little embarrassed to know how much he is talked about in pulpits and in living rooms today. He was a common man. He was a carpenter by trade, which meant that he was likely a hard worker. Though he was from the lineage of King David, he was far removed from him. As a result, he lived a very modest and humble lifestyle. Had it not been for God's amazing plan for him we likely would have never even heard of him, but God did have a plan and Joseph responded in a way that each of us should follow. As we study Joseph's response to this crisis, I want us to make four observations about God's plans and how we should respond to them:

### **I.     The Difficulty of God's Plan (vs. 18)**

When I say that God's plan is difficult I am not suggesting that what God calls us to do is always difficult. In fact, often what God calls us to do is actually very simple. We often complicate it because God's plans are usually very different than our own plans. As a result, we find His plans to be difficult because it is so different than what we want or anticipate.

Can you imagine what Joseph was going through in this moment? In that culture, most marriages were pre-arranged much earlier in life. This began the "engagement" period of the relationship. Then, once a young lady was of age to marry and the man was established in a trade, the couple would officially enter the "betrothal" period, which normally lasted a year. This was not as it is today. In that culture the betrothal period was legally binding. The soon-to-be bride and groom, at that time, were considered husband and wife in all matters except that they didn't live together and the marriage hadn't been consummated. As a result, the betrothal could only be broken by the formal proceedings of divorce. During this betrothal time, the bride was preparing and learning, while the groom was literally building onto his father's house so that he and his bride would have a place to live. So here is Joseph in a wonderful season of life. He is engaged to be married to a Godly, humble, pure young lady. He is likely working by day to save money and working after hours to prepare a house for them to live in. No doubt, along the way, he is thinking of the joys and the blessings of being married. He is a grown man and, while he was modest and Godly himself, there is little doubt that he longed for all of the joys and benefits of marriage. His plan is going great. He is likely just months away from the fulfillment of his plans when all of a sudden God interrupts those plans. We are reminded from last week that God's interruptions are actually His invitations for us to join Him. This was true for Joseph, but it was very difficult to grasp in the moment. **Verse 18** says simply of Mary, "before they came together she was found to be with child." This means that before they were married and before they shared intimacy, Mary was discovered to be pregnant. Can you imagine what Joseph was going through? Can you imagine the questions that were running through his mind? Can you imagine what he must have felt towards Mary or even towards God in this moment? He was likely crushed and heartbroken. He probably felt like his world was falling apart.

We aren't told exactly when and how he discovered the news, but if we follow the progression of Scripture I think there is at least a suggestion. Let's take a minute and recap what we have already learned of the details that have led to this moment. God had promised the Israelites that He would one day send a Messiah to be a Savior for His people. This promise He gave through numerous

prophecies of the Old Testament. Due to their sin and rebellion, however, God had been silent for 400 years. For 400 years God had not given another word or another prophet. For 400 years, the people wondered if they would ever see the fulfillment that a Savior would come to them. God broke His silence one day when He sent the angel Gabriel to speak to the priest named Zacharias. When Zacharias was in the temple offering sacrifices to God, the angel appeared and declared that Zacharias and his wife Elizabeth would have a child. This was significant because Elizabeth was up in age and she was barren, so it was a miracle. Specifically, the angel said that the child's name would be John and that he would be a forerunner to the Messiah, the Savior. This was a wonderful time because Zacharias knew that God was up to something amazing. Then six months later, God sent the angel to Nazareth to a young teenage girl that was a relative of the older Elizabeth. The girl's name was Mary. She was a virgin who was engaged to Joseph. To her surprise, God had been watching her and preparing her for something far beyond her wildest dreams. He had planned for her to be the mother of His Son. So, the angel gave the message that she had been chosen by God and that she would miraculously conceive and give birth to a baby Who would be called the Son of the Most High God because He was not conceived as other babies are. We remember that Mary trusted God's plan and surrendered herself completely to God's will for her life. Interestingly, **Luke 1:39** tells us an important note about what happened next. It says, "Now at this time Mary arose and went in a hurry to the hill country, to a city of Judah." She was going to visit her relative Elizabeth. This made sense to her. The angel had spoken about Elizabeth and the miracle that had occurred in her life. This seemed to have suggested that she should go see for herself. Perhaps she thought of how Elizabeth could use support and help from family during such an important time. Either way, Mary went in a hurry to visit Elizabeth. We aren't given any indication at all that she ever saw Joseph before leaving or explained anything to him. She just left quickly to get to Elizabeth. When she arrived, Elizabeth was six months pregnant just as the angel said. Mary stayed with her and helped her until after baby John was born. Then she returned to Nazareth.

I believe it is here that we pick up the story in Matthew 1:18. Remember, Mary had left town in a hurry with likely no explanation. She had been gone for three to four months. Interestingly, we know today that first-time moms usually begin showing between 12-16 weeks, which is likely the same timeframe for Mary's return home. So, Mary is starting to show. She can't hide her pregnancy any longer. Can you imagine the ruckus around town as rumors start to swirl? Can you imagine the confusion, questions, and frustrations that Joseph must have experienced? This was his soon-to-be-wife. Where had she really been over the past 4 months? Who had she been with? What was really going on? Why had God allowed this to happen? Where was God in all of this? All of these questions and more must have been going through his mind. Needless to say, this is not at all what Joseph had planned. Certainly, it must have been difficult to see how God was in all this. However, in ways that Joseph couldn't fathom, God was still at work and His plan was perfect. **Isaiah 55:8-9** says it well, " 'For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,' declares the Lord. 'For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.' "

## **II. The Dilemma of God's Plan (vs. 19-20a)**

I believe that Joseph was in a predicament. There was no middle ground here. He had to act. He had to do something. There are likely times that we would rather just sit back and not get involved or take action. Joseph didn't have that luxury. This was his fiancé. She has been gone for months and she has returned pregnant. And Joseph knew very well that he wasn't the father. He was in a crisis.

We learn something interesting about Joseph here. The Bible says the he was a righteous man. In fact, the KJV says that he was a "just" man. It means that he was a true, honest man. He was a man who lived his life truthfully above reproach. He was the same in private as he was in public. He didn't put on a front, a show, or a mask. There was no hypocrisy in him. The important thing to note is that this describes his standing before God. In other words, he lived his life with such consistency because he continually understood that you can't hide anything from God. So, Joseph desired to please God in everything he did. What I want us to see here is that Joseph faced this dilemma not because he had disobeyed God. There are times we face crisis because of our disobedience. However, there are also times in our obedience that God brings us to a crisis of belief that causes us to trust Him in ways that we thought unimaginable. Though he was righteous, he still struggled through this circumstance. What did Joseph experience in this dilemma?

#### **A. He Experienced Doubt**

Can you imagine the conversation that must have taken place between Mary and Joseph? "Joseph, I'm pregnant, but you shouldn't be upset or angry or hurt because the Holy Spirit is the One who made me pregnant?" Yes, Joseph was a righteous man, but he was a man. He knew how things happened biologically. He'd never heard of such a thing. "Mary, you mean to tell me that God did this to you? Yeah right!" Indeed, there had never before been a virgin conceive in the history of the world. The thought was foolish. I imagine he questioned her but couldn't make sense of it at all. He wondered who was the real father? I imagine he wondered exactly when this happened? In this moment, it is clear that he had no satisfactory answers, which led him to doubt her. He felt lonely, hurt, and betrayed.

#### **B. He Experienced Fear**

In the midst of all of this, Joseph still loved Mary and still weighed out the reality that he had established a covenant with her. How do we know that he experienced fear? Because of what the angel said. The angel specifically said, "Don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife." Why did the angel say this? Because he still loved her, but he was afraid to marry her. Why would he be afraid? I don't know every detail and possible fear, but can you imagine the perception that this gave the people? Mary has returned home pregnant. The city of people didn't know exactly how far along she was. They didn't know the details. They didn't know that she and Joseph hadn't been intimate. They just knew she had left town in a hurry. If Joseph was the father of the baby, what would he do? He would marry her. So, by marrying her he would be implying that he was guilty of wrongdoing. But if he wasn't the father of the baby, what would he do? He would issue her a divorce, which would imply that Mary had been unfaithful. Can you imagine the fear? If he rejects her she will likely be stoned to death for adultery, but if he marries her he would be taking on the

same shame and accusation that Mary herself was receiving. In the eyes of public opinion, he would be criticized, slandered, and rejected as a sinner. He would be seen as guilty. Can't you hear the rumors? "Oh, there's Joseph and Mary. Look, she's already pregnant and they aren't even married yet. Can you believe he did that to her? You know they've been fooling around. They should have known better. I don't know how God can bless that. Oh, the nerve of them showing up here like nothing is wrong. Like God is showing them favor or something. Kids, don't be like Mary and Joseph. They aren't even married yet and she's about to have a baby." Though he had done nothing wrong and was righteous before God, the crowd would accuse, condemn, mock, criticize, and ridicule. He certainly faced fear.

### C. He Experienced Pressure

Can you imagine what his buddies were recommending at this point? She has broken his heart. He feels betrayed. I'm sure they were pressuring him and saying all sorts of things. I'm sure they wanted him to throw the book at her. According to the Law, if found guilty she could be stoned to death. I'm sure that many had their own opinions of what he should do. He was likely pressured in all sorts of ways, even if the pressure was all internal as he quietly bore the pain. However, Joseph was a righteous man. His main concern was to do what was right. More than the emotional appeal of others or even where his own personal emotions might lead, he wanted to honor God and do what was right. The truth is that he knew this wasn't his baby. He also knew Deuteronomy 24:1, which gave instructions on the requirements of divorce. He determined that he really had one choice. The right thing to do was to divorce Mary. From his perspective she had been unfaithful to him, which was the only possible explanation for her pregnancy. He even likely concluded that she was lying to him about how this happened. So, he planned to write her a bill of divorce. This may sound harsh, but he had determined that he could do this privately in a way that would not bring disgrace or shame. Commentator **John Phillips** explains, "Joseph decided to act as kindly as he could by putting the bill of divorcement in her hand privately instead of exposing her to the shame of public trial and the danger of an official sentence. He may also have planned to omit any cause in the bill so that there would be no public record to convict her."

You may be sitting here thinking, "Where is God in all of this? This just doesn't make sense." God was right there in the middle of it all, working everything together for His glory and according to His sovereign plan. Remember **Luke 1:37**, "For nothing will be impossible with God." Joseph was about to learn this firsthand.

### III. The Discovery of God's Plan (vs. 20b-23)

In my imagination, I imagine that Joseph worked all day as he normally would but with a very heavy heart. He has pondered intently over his predicament. Being a righteous man, he has likely prayed and sought God's will. He has likely thought through the Law of God and sought to have understanding. He is now at his home in the evening and he has come to this clear decision. He has determined that a private and gracious divorce is the choice that must be made. He sets his

mind to it and then he goes to bed. Little did he know that even in his sleep, God could speak. Even while in his bed, God could direct his paths. Now, I do want to remind us that this isn't God's normal method of speaking to man. However, this was no normal occasion. Don't go believing everything that you dream about. **\*\*ILL:** I one day dreamed that I was as good as Michael Jordan, but the next day when I was on the court I still couldn't dunk a basketball. **IOW:** Don't assume your dreams are a sign from God. In Joseph's case, though, God was working supernaturally to reveal His plans.

The Bible tells us that night the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and immediately addressed his circumstance. He said specifically, "Joseph, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife." From here the angel says nothing else about Joseph. Everything from this point on was completely about God and His working. In other words, God is calling Joseph to put his focus on God. Up to this point he has felt fear, pressure, and hurt. However, it is important to realize that when we are focused on God, He brings victory and healing over all these other influences. It's like God is saying, "Joseph, you are looking at this all wrong. You are focused on Mary. You are wondering all these things. You are thinking too much about what others think, but Joseph I want you to focus on what I want. And My will is that you take Mary to be your wife." God was bringing Joseph to focus on an audience of One. It is at this revelation that God begins to explain His plan. God was doing far more in this moment than Joseph could have ever imagined. So, the angel begins to explain God's plan. Notice what God's plan would do:

#### **A. God's Plan Displayed His Power**

We saw it last week. Remember that the angel told Mary that she would conceive and bear a son and name Him Jesus. Mary then asked, "How can this be since I am a virgin?" The angel explained, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the Holy Child shall be called the Son of God." We don't know all of the details, but we do know that the conception was a miracle. Apparently, this information was more than enough for Mary to accept and understand. She didn't ask another question about the process. She simply understood that God promised He was going to do it and He had the power to accomplish it. She trusted that this was no problem for God, Who created our bodies and knows how they work and exactly what was needed to fulfill His plan. Now here in Matthew 1, the angel is simply summarizing the same thing. "The Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit." Surely Joseph didn't understand every detail of this. This was certainly new and hard to grasp, but Joseph could trust God's power. If He had the power to give life to an old woman named Sarah and the power to give life to a barren woman named Hannah, then surely He had the power to create life in the womb of a virgin. By the way, we have to believe this encouraged Joseph. If God could work so mightily on behalf of these ladies, then surely God could work mightily for Joseph. Think of it. Because of the power of God, He took a common, ordinary, humble carpenter with limited means and meager education and raised him up to be the adoptive father who would help to raise the very Son of God. It is a living illustration of **1 Corinthians 1:26-31**.

Friends, in the same way, we may not always see it immediately but we can trust God's plans and recognize in them that He will display His power for His own glory. If God could work this mightily in and with Joseph, then we can be confident of His power to do the same in our lives.

## **B. God's Plan Revealed His Purpose**

In Joseph's case, God encouraged him by explaining that He had a providential purpose for this whole ordeal. Joseph could've never dreamed what he was soon to learn about God's purpose. The angel explained, "You shall call His name Jesus." In Biblical times names were significant and had great meaning. And on some special occasions, God specifically instructed the parents what to name the child because He was giving a direct message to the people. The name of this Child is one such example. What is significant about the name Jesus? It's significance is found in it's meaning. It means, "God our Savior." If the name wasn't clear enough, the angel further explained, "He will save His people from their sins." This is the very first mention of "sin" in the New Testament. The word means "failure to hit the mark". It was referring to failing to keep the Law. The Bible tells us clearly in **Romans 3:23**, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." This is every single one of us. We have all sinned against God and **Romans 6:23a** explains the consequence, "For the wages of sin is death." Our sin caused death and separation and there is no way that we could be restored to God without God intervening and working for us. So, when we could do nothing to save ourselves, God graciously gave His Son so that all who believe in Him would be rescued from our sins. **John 3:16-17** says it well, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him."

## **C. God's Plan Fulfilled His Promise**

There is another component to God's plan. It revealed that God is faithful to fulfill His promises. **Numbers 23:19** explains, "God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent; Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?" In **Jeremiah 1:12b** God explains it this way, "I am watching over My word to perform it." The point is, whatever God promises He does. We see this in two references in this passage. First, the angel called Joseph "son of David." This title sounds strange, especially since we know that Joseph's father was named Jacob. But there is a significant reason for this. In **2 Samuel 7, 1000 years earlier**, God had promised that the Savior would come through the lineage of David. This reference would cause Joseph to remember God's promise from centuries earlier. Joseph was definitely in the Davidic line, which meant that Jesus would be born in this same line. The point is that God was faithful to fulfill His promise. But not only that, Matthew connected this to another prophecy from **Isaiah 7:14**, which was given nearly **600 years earlier**. Think about that. God foretold this 1000 years earlier, then again 600 years earlier, and then through their stubbornness and rebellion the Jews went their own direction. This resulted in God's silence for four hundred

years. But even in the silence, God was faithfully working to fulfill His promises. Friend, this is the character and nature of God. We can trust that He will always keep His promises.

Now that the message had been revealed and God's plan had been discovered, Joseph wakes up. I wonder what his first thought was? We aren't told, but we do see a final part of God's plan.

#### IV. The Decision of God's Plan (vs. 24-25)

We must remember that God never gives us information simply for the sake of knowledge. God never moves simply for our awareness. God convicts, stirs, guides, and moves so that we will respond with action. The point is that Joseph couldn't stay where he was and go with God at the same time. He could either join God in His plan or he could reject God, but there was no middle ground. He was at a crossroads. This was a moment of decision.

He could choose to live his life in fear, wondering, "What is everyone going to say about me?" He could live his life in ease and comfort thinking, "This is going to cost me too much." He could harden his heart and say, "God, this isn't what I wanted. This isn't my plan." Or he could trust God's plan, surrender to God's will, and obey. He could focus on the cost or he could focus on the privilege. He could focus on the interruption or he could focus on the divine invitation. He could focus on the will of the people or he could focus on the will of God. He could focus on the opinion of man or he could focus on the opportunity given by God. Notice how he responded in **verse 24**. It says simply but powerfully, "Joseph did as the angel of the Lord commanded him." I am so thankful that he chose to trust God and say "Yes!" to Him. His actions of faith and obedience are a powerful example for us to follow. Please never forget this simple statement, "**Extraordinary moves of God are accomplished through ordinary acts of obedience.**" We have no idea how greatly God can work and what He will do through one single act of obedience. Joseph didn't know everything that would unfold, but he knew enough to trust God and obey. And, in doing so, God allowed Joseph to play an active role in one of the greatest miracles the world has ever seen.

You may be here today thinking, "Well that's great for Joseph, but God could never use me in such a way. In fact, God would never do something so personal in my life." Friend, if God would care so deeply for a simple carpenter from Nazareth, I assure you that He cares for you. In fact, this Child that was born, named Jesus, didn't just come to be a Savior for His mother and father and their people. He came to be a Savior for all. His birth was for you and me as much as it was for them 2,000 years ago. So, I invite you today to trust Him and receive Him by faith.

Others may be thinking, "Pastor, I am struggling with obeying God. I sure wish I had a clear word from an angel." The truth is that you have a Word that is far clearer than the word from an angel. In fact, it is far more in-depth and very precise. It's called the Bible. Get in it. Let it get into your heart and mind and ask God to guide you and lead you. He will. As He leads, you will likely never know the full story in advance, but you will know enough to trust God, surrender to Him, and obey.

When we opened this passage we began with a man who was hurt, confused, betrayed, and afraid. But as we end the passage we see a man at peace, a man with clarity, a man with Godly conviction and deep commitment. What brought the change? How did this happen? The change occurred



the moment that Joseph decided to trust God's plan and obey. I'm here to tell you this morning that if you will be faithful to trust God and obey, you will experience the same change.