

December 8, 2019

Good News of Peace (or Not) for Joseph

Matthew 1:18-25

What do you do when your world falls apart? When the wheels fall off?

Christmas card pictures of Mary, Joseph and Jesus are delightfully romantic and idyllic. But think of the heart-breaking crisis Joseph faced. His fiancée is pregnant. He knows he isn't the father. Who is? She has this wild story of an angel ... Honestly? Joseph faces awful questions: Clearly Mary has been unfaithful so who is the father? How could Mary let this happen? The engagement should be off – how can he avoid scandal? What will people think? Of him? Of Mary? What will happen to her? To the child?

The peaceful life he had been living is thrown into chaos. How did God let this happen? How does he deal with his emotions?

Peace with God

I can't imagine that Joseph just placidly accepted this. Imagine the questions Joseph has for God. The anger Joseph has toward God.

It's OK to be honest with God. Many Psalms are passionate prayers of honest emotion. For example, David writes words Joseph could identify with (Psalm 13:1-4):

*O LORD, how long will you forget me? Forever?
How long will you look the other way?
How long must I struggle with anguish in my soul,
with sorrow in my heart every day?
How long will my enemy have the upper hand?
Turn and answer me, O LORD my God!
Restore the sparkle to my eyes, or I will die.
Don't let my enemies gloat, saying, "We have defeated him!"
Don't let them rejoice at my downfall.*

What does Joseph do? Let's not romanticize him too much. I'm sure he's upset. I'm sure he panics. But he also is open to God. He also prays. There is a model here for us as we face difficult decisions and deal with doubts: it's OK to be stressed, but we also need to pray about it, ask God about it, pester God about it. And wait ...

Some of us are good at talking, but not so good at listening. Perhaps we need to take some time – some quiet time – to listen to what God might be saying to us ...

The angel's words to Joseph are an encouragement. But perhaps also a bit of gentle chastisement for his lack of faith. Sometimes we need to hear God's encouragement ... and correction. His wisdom. His conviction. His judgment on our sin. It's only when we

deal with what separates us from God, that we can be at peace with Him.

That doesn't mean God will necessarily fix everything the way we'd like. Mary is still pregnant. Tongues are still wagging. There will be a lifetime of consequences.

At the end of the day, Joseph discovers that when he honestly deals with God, He is at peace with God: *"When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife"* (Matthew 1:24). David discovered the same thing. Psalm 13, which we read earlier, ends with these words: *"But I trust in your unfailing love. I will rejoice because you have rescued me. I will sing to the LORD because he is good to me."* (Psalm 13:5-6)

Are you at peace with God? Or do you have issues that need to be dealt with? Are there things in your life (using the biblical word, "sin") that needs to be confessed. Repented of. Forgiven. And then do you need to move forward in a different direction?

The Good News is we can pray about anything: disappointments and dreams, successes and fears, failures and victories. Talk honestly with God. And listen honestly to God ...

Peace with other people

If Joseph is angry and frustrated with God, imagine how he felt about Mary? She clearly had been unfaithful. He'd be devastated. Feel betrayed. Embarrassed. Humiliated.

How would you have handled this if you were Joseph?

It would be easy for Joseph to want to get back at Mary. Even before the angel spoke to Joseph, though, notice how he dealt with this: He wanted to show discretion even though he justifiably felt wronged. *"Joseph was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, so he had in mind to divorce her quietly"* (Matthew 1:19). He was thinking of himself. And Mary. He was anxious that she would not be dishonored, even though that might mean an extra hit for him and his reputation.

This was not about vengeance. It was not about grudges. It was not about his hurt feelings. It was about thinking of someone else first. It was about doing what was right.

It was a huge leap of faith for Joseph, then, to trust the angel. But he was willing to do it. We know he will face great difficulties and dangers because of this child (having to flee with Mary and the boy to Egypt within the first couple of years). He will teach Jesus his trade. He will model a father's love. He will love Mary (and her son) so much he suppresses his doubts about her faithfulness and will allow himself to be regarded as the father of her child, knowing he wasn't (*"Isn't this Joseph's son?"* Luke 4:22).

There are people I can hold grudges against. People who have hurt me. Who have betrayed me. Who have embarrassed and humiliated me. How do I handle that?

I can hold it against them. It makes **me** feel good to hold on to my “righteous” anger. But what does it accomplish? It takes a lot of energy on my part. It keeps me awake at night. It affects my health. And the other person? It does absolutely nothing to them! It doesn’t hurt them at all. They don’t even know I’m angry with them. I’m only punishing myself. I THINK I’m punishing the other person; in fact I only hurt myself!

Or I can let it go. I can choose to forgive. And do what is best for the other person. I can move on. We can move on. That is good for the other person. It is also best for my mental, physical, and spiritual health.

In the Lord’s prayer, Jesus instructs us to pray, ***“Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us.”*** This is the one and only phrase in the Lord’s prayer Jesus chooses to elaborate on. Right after teaching us the prayer, Jesus adds, *“For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins”* (Matthew 6:12-15). I wish Jesus hadn’t said that.

I wish He didn’t say, *“You have heard that it said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven ... If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect”* (Matthew 5:43-48).

Is this possible? Jesus supremely modeled this on the cross. As the people who crucified stood around Him, He prayed: *“Father, forgive them ...”* (Luke 23:24).

One wise pundit observed that peace-making and forgiveness demand the most heroic labour and the most difficult sacrifice. They demand greater heroism than war. Anyone can hold a grudge. Anyone can get angry. Anyone can lash out. Really strong people – heroic people – godly people – Christ-like people – are able to forgive. *“The glory of Christianity is to conquer by forgiveness”* (William Blake).

Peace with yourself

We need God’s forgiveness to be at peace. We know there are things in our life that are wrong. Downright evil. Let’s be brutally honest. I have sinned. You have sinned. We have all sinned. In our postmodern culture that is not an absolute truth we like to hear, but it’s true. We all know it. Sometimes our wrongdoing is thinking we’re perfect. Or holding onto a grudge and not being obedient to Jesus’ command to forgive. It’s only as we are honest about it that we can actually begin to deal with it. We have to deal with the issues in our life that hold us back to.

We need to forgive others to be at peace. *“Forgive others, and you will be forgiven ...”* It sounds like our forgiveness from God is conditional. God’s forgiveness, grace, and mercy are His free gifts. They are not conditional at all. But Jesus teaches us to model

the same unconditional grace, mercy, and forgiveness He shows us, to one another. As we have experienced God's love, we are to love other people (read 1 John 4-5).

When we do forgive others, we experience peace within ourselves. When we forgive others, paradoxically we are free to enjoy life more fully. Forgiveness is the giving, and so the receiving, of life. We let go of the anger, bitterness, resentment, and pain that we have been holding on to, and we discover freedom for ourselves, too.

We also need to forgive ourselves to be at peace. We are often our own harshest critics. Are we holding on to things God has already dealt with? God forgives you. Let it go! It's only when Joseph comes to terms with his doubts, anger, and pain – he lets things go – that then can he move on.

We struggle with our own sense of self-identity and self-image. Our egos are fragile. We need to remind ourselves that God loves us. We need to recognize the truth that we are God's beloved creations and His children. We need to appreciate the gifts, talents and abilities with which God has blessed us and use them for his glory. We need to forgive ourselves and allow God to help us become the people He created us to be.

When we find our identity as God's beloved, we can have peace within ourselves. Frank Doyle notes, *"Joseph is the least quotable of all the saints: the Gospels do not record anything he said. Yet he was the rocklike foundation of the family, the unflappable, faithful, quiet father, who must have loomed large in the mind of Jesus."* We know about Joseph through what he did, not what he said. Here was a man who – to the best of our knowledge – never said much. Fame didn't matter. Fortune didn't matter. Faithfulness, forgiveness, integrity, and love mattered. Through his quiet, faithful, unflappable life, Joseph left a legacy that endures for all time.

*Lord, how can I be at peace with You ...
What questions do I need to ask? What issues do we need to talk about? What do I need to confess? What do I need to hear ...*

*Lord, how can I be at peace with others ...
What grudges am I holding on to? Who have I cut off? What hurts do I nurse? How am I hurting myself? How can I forgive, forget, and move on ...*

*Lord, how can I be at peace with myself ...
As I have forgiven those who have hurt me, Lord give me your peace ... As I have confessed my sin to God, what do I need to forgive myself for?*

Lord give me your peace.

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