

Joseph: A Changing Plan

December 17, 2023

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

Matthew 1:18-25

Session Outline

1. Startling News (Matthew 1:18-19)
2. Change of Plans (Matthew 1:20-21)
3. Prophecy Fulfilled (Matthew 1:22-25)

Theological Theme

God's ways and plans are higher than ours. When faced with His instructions or opportunities, we must choose whether we will trust and obey or push our own agendas forward.

Call to Action

What are the plans God is asking you to reconsider? What will you have to get past to realize a different dream?



Leader Guide

Joseph: A Changing Plan

Introduction

How well do you handle change? Although change is inevitable and a common part of life for everyone, it can be difficult and tough to manage. Some people are so driven by their schedules and plans that they refuse to adapt or adjust. Others don't make schedules so that they don't have to change them. And still plenty of people fall somewhere between.

Plans and schedules are not bad or ungodly, but when we are so focused on our plans that we don't allow any room for unexpected opportunities, then we are off track. While schedules can keep us from overlooking things and help us make the most of our time, we were never called to worship the calendar or trust in our own ability to manage our time. Even while we need to be good stewards of our time, we also need to be aware when God is working and how that may change our plans.

- ❓ What kind of time manager are you? How do you typically respond when your plans get interrupted?
- ❓ What does the way you handle your schedule and plans indicate about the amount of trust you put in God each day?

Session Summary


God's plan for Jesus to be born of a virgin caused upheaval in both Mary and Joseph's lives. When Joseph's plans were interrupted, he decided to quietly divorce Mary since they were betrothed already. These plans troubled him, and an angel appeared to him in a dream. This heavenly messenger gave Joseph guidance and instructions about what he needed to do next.

After receiving the information from the angel, Joseph was faced with a decision: He had to decide whether to listen to God or follow his own plans. Joseph made the right choice and decided to trust and obey what the angel of the Lord told him. Sometimes our dreams must change for us to follow God's will for our lives. When we decide to trust God fully, we will position ourselves to be used by Him in ways we could never have imagined.

1. Startling News (Matthew 1:18-19)

Matthew's description of the birth of Jesus Christ gives us more context surrounding Jesus's birth and those who were included in God's plan. In this passage, we are given insight into the perspective of Joseph, the man chosen to be the earthly father of Jesus. Matthew confirms the virgin conception without as many details about the angelic announcement to Mary as Luke included.

Many who study Jesus's birth take time to think about how it must have been for the young, betrothed girl, but here we have the opportunity to consider the same situation through the eyes of Joseph. He was the man engaged to the girl who was found to be pregnant. This was not an easy circumstance for the bridegroom to handle, and we can learn much about this man God chose for this assignment from the way he responded.

 Why do you think it is helpful to look at the birth of Christ from other perspectives in addition to Mary's? What are some additional perspectives on the birth of Jesus that the Bible gives outside of Mary and Joseph?

Consider what it would be like as Joseph found out the woman he planned to marry and was committed to, although they were not yet married, was expecting a baby. Naturally, he would know he had no part in the conception and would assume she had been unfaithful. By law Mary could have been severely punished for being pregnant without being married. Scripture tells us what kind of man Joseph was.

According to culture of the day, a betrothal was akin to marriage in that Joseph was considered her husband already though they were not living as man and wife or enjoying sexual intimacy yet. We learn that Joseph was a just man and instead of being outraged and seeking to punish Mary for her assumed unfaithfulness, he planned to quietly divorce her and protect her from as much public humiliation as possible.

Betrothal

A betrothed couple was as good as married, and breaking off the relationship was seen as divorce, even though the couple had not yet been married. It also helps us gain a better perspective of the emotional state of Mary and Joseph when we realize that she was probably in her teens at the time of these events. The minimum marriageable age in Israel was twelve for women and thirteen for men. To remain unmarried as late as one's twenties may have been cause for social embarrassment.

- ❓ What are some of the more likely or common responses Joseph could have had to finding out his betrothed was expecting? How would some of these reactions have been justifiable?

Even though they were not fully married, the relationship was legally binding and required divorce to dissolve. It would have been impossible to keep the situation totally under wraps, but Joseph planned to take care of the divorce as privately as he could. Think about all the emotions and possible reactions he would have experienced as the information about Mary came to light.

- ❓ Application: What situation are you facing where you have been tempted to react according to your flesh but should possibly follow the example of Joseph and seek the best for the other person?

2. Change of Plans (Matthew 1:20-21)

As Joseph planned how to handle the situation with his pregnant fiancée, he had a dream that changed everything. We know it was on his mind because the Bible says that while he was thinking about these things an angel appeared to him in a dream. This was slightly different from the angelic appearance Mary experienced but was still to be taken seriously. Joseph was troubled about what was happening and maybe even about the plans he had made, then he heard from an angel in a dream.

- ❓ What happens to you when you are dealing with a situation that troubles you and won't let your mind rest? Where do you typically turn for comfort? Why?


The angel addressing Joseph by the title “son of David” (v. 20) was a sign that this was an important and intentional encounter. This recognized his lineage to David and gave weight to what he was about to hear. The angel announced that Mary had conceived by the Holy Spirit. She had not been unfaithful to him, and bigger plans than he could have imagined were at work.

No other accounts of someone being pregnant by the Spirit of God existed, and it is clear this declaration by the angel was powerfully persuasive. Joseph realized this would be significant and that he was chosen to be a major part of what God was doing.

- ❓ What are some different ways Joseph could have responded to the angel's message? How do you most often respond when you hear from God?

This angel wasted no time giving Joseph additional details about what would happen and what he needed to do. He was told to name the child Jesus. The name Jesus means, “salvation of Yahweh” and was fairly common in that day; it was considered to be a blessed name and appropriate for the Son of God.

The angel also told Joseph what this son would do. As the coming Messiah, Jesus would “save his people from their sins” (v. 21). Joseph had been raised in the Jewish faith and the significance of the Messiah was not lost on him. This description of the work of Jesus reminds that the point of Jesus’s coming was to save His people. From the very beginning, God’s plan has been for Jesus to bring salvation to the world so that we might be saved. Joseph would have the honor of shepherding and guiding the one and only Son of God if he chose to listen and obey.


 Application: When have your plans been disrupted and you had to choose whether to push for your own agenda or trust and obey what God said? What makes it difficult to let go of our plans and trust God in these moments?

3. Prophecy Fulfilled (Matthew 1:22-25)

Just as we often do, Joseph had to choose whether he would trust and obey what God said. Matthew quoted Isaiah 7:14 to make clear that prophecy was being fulfilled by what was happening in Joseph’s life. These events were the fulfillment of God’s promises from many years before.

Immanuel literally means “God is with us” (v. 23), and Jesus came as God wrapped in human form. Although this news disrupted the plans Joseph had made with Mary, we see that Joseph was willing to lay aside what he thought was best for what He knew was God’s plan. What God had planned for Mary and Joseph was better than anything they had planned for themselves.

Scripture tells us that Joseph woke up from his sleep and obeyed God. Joseph’s immediate obedience indicates that he did not waver in doubt. He heard God and recognized the importance of the message from the angel, so he obeyed. Joseph married Mary but he didn’t assert any rights as her husband until after she gave birth to the Son of God. This showed respect and affirmed the prophecies of the virgin birth. He had no doubts that God had spoken truth, and he obeyed God to avoid any suggestion of human conception.

 Why is it important that Joseph immediately obeyed without wavering or doubting? Where is God calling you to obedience today?

The miraculous conception of Jesus is foundational to our faith and studying how Joseph handled himself during difficult circumstances is a testimony to his commitment to fulfilling the role God gave him. He named his son Jesus, just as the angel commanded.

- ❓ Why is it important to recognize that Joseph was fully obedient to the things God called him to do? Where is God calling you to display full obedience that you might have only responded to in part?

Instead of being obsessed with making our own plans and carrying them out, we should be willing to rethink our ideas for our futures as Joseph did. When God speaks, we can trust Him even when it means surrendering our plans and obeying His instructions, even if they seem unusual. When we do, we may be invited into the miraculous.

- ❓ Application: What is God calling you to rethink the plans you've made for yourself? How will you respond?

Conclusion

Sometimes our plans are upended without warning. What you were expecting to happen suddenly changes. How we handle these times can be an indicator of our faith. Joseph was an honorable man with a good reputation. He was engaged to a young woman, and their future was laid out. Then he got word that she was expecting a baby and suddenly everything was different.

Because he was a just man, Joseph didn't lash out at Mary and look for ways to punish her for being pregnant although they had never been intimate with each other. He assumed things about the situation but still planned to treat her kindly and divorce her quietly. We have the choice of how we will react when circumstances get tough. Joseph was troubled by these events, but while he slept, an angel appeared in a dream and spoke to him.

The message from the angel gave Joseph the missing details about Mary's pregnancy and instructions for what he was supposed to do. Once Joseph received these instructions, he was faced with the choice of whether to trust and obey what God said or continue with his own plans. Joseph made the right choice and was blessed with the privilege of raising Jesus as his son. God used him in a mighty way, and he was invited into the miraculous. Choosing to trust and obey the Lord is always the right choice.

- 🔍 When was a time God interrupted your plans? How did you respond?
- 🔍 How can we as a group encourage one another to respond to God in obedience, even when it's difficult?
- 🔍 How might living with trust and obedience in the Lord give us opportunity for gospel conversations with others?

Prayer of Response

Praise the Lord for His miraculous plans and the fact that He includes you in His work. Ask for wisdom to recognize when He is changing your plans and commit to trusting and obeying Him in all things.

Memory Verse

She will give birth to a son, and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." - Matthew 1:21

Additional Resources

- *Exalting Jesus in Matthew* by Danny Akin
- *Be Loyal* by Warren Wiersbe
- *The Gospel According to Matthew* by Leon Morris

Disciples Multiplying Disciples



Historical Context of Matthew

Purpose

Matthew probably wrote his Gospel in order to preserve written eyewitness testimony about the ministry of Jesus. Matthew's Gospel emphasizes certain theological truths. First, Jesus is the Messiah, the long-awaited King of God's people. Second, Jesus is the new Abraham, the founder of a new spiritual Israel consisting of all people who choose to follow him. This new Israel will consist of both Jews and Gentiles. Third, Jesus is the new Moses, the deliverer and instructor of God's people. Fourth, Jesus is the Immanuel, the virgin-born Son of God who fulfills the promises of the OT.

Author

The author did not identify himself in the text. However, the title that ascribes this Gospel to Matthew appears in the earliest manuscripts and is possibly original. Titles became necessary to distinguish one Gospel from another when the four Gospels began to circulate as a single collection. Many early church fathers (Papias, Irenaeus, Pantaenus, and Origen) acknowledged Matthew as the author. Papias also contended that Matthew first wrote in Hebrew, implying that this Gospel was later translated into Greek.

Setting

Determining the date of composition of Matthew's Gospel depends largely on the relationship of the Gospels to one another. Most scholars believe that Matthew utilized Mark's Gospel in writing his own gospel. If this is correct, Matthew's Gospel must postdate Mark's. However, the date of Mark's Gospel is also shrouded in mystery. Irenaeus (ca AD 180) seems to claim that Mark wrote his Gospel after Peter's death in the mid-60s. However, Clement of Alexandria, who wrote only twenty years after Irenaeus, claimed that Mark wrote his Gospel while Peter was still alive. Given the ambiguity of the historical evidence, a decision must be based on other factors.

The date of composition for Mark is best inferred from the date of Luke and Acts. The abrupt ending of Acts which left Paul under house arrest in Rome implies that Acts was written before Paul's release. Since one of the major themes of Acts is the legality of Christianity in the Roman Empire, one would have expected Luke to mention Paul's release by the emperor if it had already occurred. This evidence dates Acts to the early 60s. Luke and Acts were two volumes of a single work, as the prologues to these books demonstrate. Luke was written before Acts. Given the amount of research that Luke invested in the book and the travel that eyewitness interviews probably required, a date in the late 50s is reasonable. If Luke used Mark in writing his own Gospel, as seems likely, by implication Mark was written some time before the late 50s, perhaps the early to mid-50s. Thus, despite Matthew's dependence on Mark, Matthew may have been written any time beginning in the mid-50s once Mark was completed. The earliest historical evidence is consistent with this opinion, since Irenaeus (ca AD 180) claimed that Matthew wrote his Gospel while Peter and Paul were preaching in Rome (early AD 60s).

Special Features

This Gospel was written from a strong Jewish perspective to show that Jesus is the Messiah promised in the Old Testament.

Extended Commentary

Matthew 1:18-25

1:18 The words of Jesus Christ are in an emphatic position in the Greek text, implying that the circumstances of Jesus's birth differed from those of everyone else in the genealogy. Although several of those people were conceived by miracles, they all had a human father. Only Jesus was born of a virgin. Mary had been engaged to Joseph. However, ancient Jewish engagement was as legally binding as marriage. The couple did not live together or engage in sexual intercourse. But the engagement could only be ended by divorce (thus, Joseph's decision in 1:19). Before they came together means that Joseph and Mary had not yet had intercourse. Joseph thus assumed that Mary had been unfaithful. Pregnant from the Holy Spirit means that Mary's pregnancy was a miracle performed by the Spirit, not that God assumed material form and physically impregnated her. This makes Jesus's conception dramatically different from Greek myths that speak of children born to gods who lay with women.

1:19 Joseph did not want to humiliate Mary publicly because he was a righteous man. His peers most likely expected him to expose her apparent sin, but true righteousness is characterized by compassion and mercy, an important theme for Matthew (5:6–7, 21–26, 38–48).

1:20 God spoke to Joseph through dreams, just as he did to his OT namesake (Gn 37:1–11). The title son of David reminded Joseph of his royal lineage and prepared him for the announcement of Messiah's birth. On conceived ... from the Holy Spirit, see note at v. 18.

1:21 Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua which means "Yahweh saves." The angel explained that Jesus's name revealed his purpose: He would rescue sinners from the punishment they deserve. This salvation would be experienced by his people, identified as those who follow Jesus.

1:22 Spoken by the Lord through the prophet implies that God was the ultimate author of the messages spoken and written by the prophets. The grammar that Matthew uses to introduce the quote from Is 7:14 (see Mt 1:23) suggests that the angel quoted this verse to Joseph during his announcement. Some interpreters argue that Matthew mishandled Is 7:14, but he seems to have handled it just as the angel did, which means his usage is backed by angelic authority.

1:23 The name Immanuel (God with us) implies Jesus's deity. Mary's virgin-born Son would be God himself living among his people. The Immanuel of Is 7:14 is to be identified with the person described in Is 9:2–7 and 11:1–9.

1:24–25 These verses emphasize Joseph's absolute obedience to the angel's instructions, a prevalent theme in these early chapters (2:13–15, 19–21). Joseph is a model of the obedience that should characterize Jesus's disciples (5:19–20). Did not have sexual relations with her confirms again that Jesus was the product of a virginal conception.¹

References

1. Charles L. Quarles, "Matthew," in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1498.