

Open the Door

Matthew 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel”

(which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

Family Life. When you *think* about those two words what comes to mind? How about Norman Rockwell? Father is at the head of the dinner table, carving the roast. Mother is wearing her unsoiled apron, beaming over the meal in elegance. The children are gathered dutifully around the table, obedient and rosy-cheeked. And when Christmas rolls around? Family life is absolutely perfect!

Now, when YOU live family life what comes to mind? How about -- Dad is snoring on the couch. Mom is a limp dish rag, completely maxed out. The younger children are fighting again. The adolescent son is locked in his room with the walls shaking to what seems like alien music. And the older daughter? She's been on social media so long that she is rarely social to her own family. Family life, according to Norman Rockwell, has no hassles, no headaches, and is never in hot water. But real family life faces painful and perplexing predicaments. Loved ones die. Children make bad decisions. Marriages go through tremendous stress

and even end in divorce. There is never enough money. Or who's going to the nursing home this week to visit mom or grandpa?

Do you think that Joseph and Mary—because they appear in the Bible—had a Norman Rockwell family life? Let's take a look.

“This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit” (Mt 1:18). If Mary's pregnancy isn't shocking enough, the explanation is even more shocking! Through the Holy Spirit? Really? Where's the proof?

Can you imagine fifteen-year-old Mary going to her twenty-something fiancée, Joseph? Joseph starts talking about floor plans and wall colors and Mary interrupts, “Joseph sit down. We need to talk. Joseph, honey, I'm pregnant.” So long Norman Rockwell. Houston, we have a problem!

Close the door. That's our first option when there is serious trouble. Joseph's first response would be to close the door. We can read Matthew 1:18 and see that the child was conceived by the Holy Spirit. We know that, and Mary knew that, but Joseph didn't know that. All he could think about was that Mary had been unfaithful. It must have torn him up. When Mary broke the news Joseph's heart must have broken into a million pieces.

“Because Joseph her **husband** was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to **divorce** her quietly” (Mt 1:19). There is a huge difference between our modern idea of engagement and that of first-century Jews. This verse describes Joseph as already being Mary's “husband,” and it also uses the word “divorce” to describe ending the engagement. Though they were not yet living together, Joseph and Mary had a binding contract that could be ended only by death or by divorce.

So Joseph plans to divorce Mary quietly. After all, he wasn't that gullible. Mary said that the Holy Spirit made her pregnant. Well, would you believe that? It's clear to Joseph that Mary wasn't the person he thought she was. Mary was, in fact, carrying another man's child. Joseph doesn't want to talk about it or work through it. So he chooses to close the door.

When all pandemonium breaks loose, another

option is to **slam the door**. In the Old Testament the penalty for adultery was stoning (Dt 22:13–21). Thankfully, Joseph passes on this option. He doesn't want to embarrass Mary or disgrace Mary or hurt Mary. He just wants to move on without Mary. This is commendable. So Matthew 1:19 calls Joseph "a righteous man."

When faced with similar family pain, sometimes we aren't as righteous. No. We slam the door. We drop verbal bombs. We rant and rave. We have tempers and we throw tantrums. We fight like cats and dogs; like the Hatfields and the McCoys. Discussion is over. Defensive lines are drawn. It's "in your face," and "it ain't gonna happen." Slam the door.

Another way of handling family hurt and hassles is to **lock the door**. This is what Joseph is planning to do—total withdrawal. Lock the door. It's so broken and I'm so done. The issue is so sensitive, so intense and so explosive, that I lock the door and throw away the key. Is there a better way?

Yes there is. **Open the door**. That's it. Open the door! But we need help—God's help—to do this. And so did Joseph. "But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a **dream** and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit'" (Mt 1:20).

Can you imagine having a dream when you are told, in effect, to wake up? "Joseph, wake up! You've been drafted!" Joseph gets the inside information—literally! Mary wasn't lying to him after all!

Joseph needed help with family life. That's why God speaks to him in a dream. In fact, four times in Matthew 1–2, we are told that God speaks to Joseph in a dream (Mt 1:20; 2:13, 19, 20).

We need help with family life, too. Martin Luther teaches us to say, "I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him." Using my "own reason or strength" I close doors. I slam doors. I lock doors. Luther continues. "But the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel." God gave dreams to Joseph. God's Holy Spirit calls us by the Gospel.

God tells Joseph, "What is conceived in Mary is from the Holy Spirit." But Jesus is not only conceived by the Holy Spirit. At his baptism Jesus is filled with the Holy Spirit. When tempted, Jesus

is empowered by the Holy Spirit. When Jesus died he gave up the Spirit. Three days later Jesus was raised by the Spirit. And the first gift Jesus gives after his resurrection is the Holy Spirit.

This same Spirit calls us by the Gospel; delivering all of the gifts purchased and won for us by our Savior. Mercy. Forgiveness. New life. And the power—in the midst of deep family pain—the power to look at our spouses and children and do what? Open the door. That's what Joseph did. Joseph finally opened the door. He accepted and loved and cared for Mary.

In the last book in the *Chronicles of Narnia*, in the book titled *The Last Battle*, C. S. Lewis describes his characters facing the mother of all battles. At a strategic point they come to a door. Some claimed that behind the door was a life-threatening monster. But once through the door, "They stood on green grass, the deep blue sky overhead, and the air blew gently on their faces like that of a day in early summer." Walking through that door took them into a heavenly kingdom. And once there, they could continue to go "further and further in" making wonderful discoveries. What's the point?

Open your foreboding door. Open your heart, open your ears and open your life to people in your family. The door isn't as threatening as it looks. In fact, when you open the door, maybe not at first, but soon enough, you will find yourself standing on green grass, the deep blue sky overhead, and the air blowing gently on your face like that of a day in early summer. Amen.

Philip Tesch
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North Highlands, California