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JOSEPH'S OBEDIENCE



How do you initially respond when you hear, "There's been a change of plans"?

QUESTION #1

BIBLE STUDIES FOR LIFE **21**

THE POINT

Following God's plan will require change in your life, but it's worth it.



THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

We always enjoyed having our kids' friends come to our home to play. Well, *almost* always. Once, two new boys came to play and they were incorrigible! The boys never listened to anything my wife or I said. And when it was time to take them home, they refused to get out of the car. They had their own idea of what they wanted to do, and no adult was going to change their plans.

Even as adults, we don't like having our plans changed. After all, they are *our* plans. Yet, no matter how we plan, things don't always go the way we want. Sometimes unforeseen circumstances intervene—and sometimes God does.

Joseph surely had plans, and those plans included Mary and a family. But God stepped in with a change of plans—and what a change of plans it was! Scripture does not record Joseph's words, but we do see his response: he acted in obedience. Through Joseph's life we see that change isn't easy, but God's changes are always worth any adjustments. The changes God makes are always for our highest good.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Matthew 1:18-19

¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.

There is an old adage: “A broken engagement is better than a divorce.” While both are painful, it’s a true statement due to the ultimate commitment in marriage. However, in the first century, the adage wouldn’t work. An engagement was a legally binding pledge of betrothal. The parents of the bride and groom arranged their children’s marriage. After they negotiated a marriage contract, the betrothed relationship became legal. Others even called the couple husband and wife; however, they did not consummate the relationship or live together until the actual marriage ceremony occurred. To break the “engagement”—the betrothal—required a divorce, and adultery was grounds for that divorce.

That’s why, when Joseph learned his plans had been changed by Mary’s pregnancy, he considered the option of divorce.

Mary “was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.” Let that phrase sink in for a moment. Of course we know what it is to be pregnant. We also know about God the Holy Spirit. But to merge those two things was unheard of, and Joseph’s mind had to be reeling from that phrase. *“What could that possibly mean?”*

Yet this singular situation is an essential aspect of Christian doctrine. The virgin birth is also important because it established the Deity of Jesus and His sinless nature. Scripture is clear that Jesus has two natures: divine and human. Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man.

What can we learn from Joseph’s initial response regarding Mary’s situation?

QUESTION #2

- ▶ “[He] emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (Phil. 2:7).
- ▶ “For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Col. 2:9).

Jesus became human so that He could die for the sins of man. He is divine so that His sacrifice would be sufficient to pay for the sins of the world. The virgin birth made it possible for Jesus to be the One perfect sacrifice.

Mary's divine pregnancy certainly changed Joseph's plans, but Joseph's actions were commendable. He took the high road by planning a quiet divorce. His sense of righteousness drove his actions (even though the law even allowed for a public stoning for adultery). Joseph chose not to create a scandal by taking Mary to the city gate.

Instead, Joseph chose the way of mercy. His plans had been changed, but that would not change his love for Mary or his desire to live righteously. So Joseph took the most righteous path he could imagine and sought to move on from this painful chapter of his life.

But God had yet another change of plans in store for Joseph.

Matthew 1:20-23

²⁰ 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. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ²³ “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us).

DISRUPTED!

From the following list, choose the words that describe how you feel when your plans are disrupted. Then answer the questions.

cheated	angry	joyful	rejected
confused	excited	anxious	interested
upset	relaxed	hurt	humbled
steadfast	blessed	foolish	at peace

What was the last personal plan that was somehow disrupted?

How did you react?

How do you hope to react in similar circumstances in the future?

"Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."

—JOSHUA 1:9

Joseph had a solid plan in place. He was doing right by Mary. He had made a great decision to treat her with mercy and dignity. But God told him to make a course correction. Sometimes God tells us to adjust our plans, not because they are *bad*, but because they are not *best*. God often has a better plan that is known to Him, but not to us.

In a sense, God's commandment put Joseph in an awkward social situation. In order to obey, Joseph had to fear God and not man. If Joseph followed the angel's command, it could make him look weak and complicit in a perceived moral failure. While many in the community certainly would misunderstand, Joseph now knew why he need not fear the response of the community: he knew the true story of Mary's pregnancy and God's plan for his life.

As Joseph listened to the description of the Messiah as the one who would "save his people from their sins," he surely realized this event was not some spur-of-the-moment decision on God's part. He surely knew and likely recalled the prophecy we studied in our last session—the very prophecy Matthew now quoted from Isaiah 7:14.

The last words of Matthew 1:23 stand out: "God with us." While "Jesus" is the earthly name given to Christ (see Luke 1:31), *Immanuel* is a more apt description. *Immanuel* actually describes what God did in sending Jesus. God's presence was intimately with His people.

Many people search their entire lives for someone powerful to be by their side. The birth of Jesus attests to the truth that God is with us.



What do the names given for the Messiah in these verses reveal about His purpose?

QUESTION #3

Matthew 1:24-25

²⁴ When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, ²⁵ but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

When we see in Scripture something we are to do, sometimes we don't obey—at least, not right away. We may have good intentions to follow through, but we wait. And the longer we wait, the easier it is to talk ourselves out of it. If we hesitate in doing the right thing, we can usually cool off our passion to obey the Lord. If we hesitate long enough, we might focus on the challenges of obeying. Soon we find ourselves doing our own thing and ignoring obedience altogether.

When we discover what we are to do, the time to obey is right then. We obey both in heart and in action. Even delayed obedience is disobedience. Joseph gave us the right example. As soon as the Lord told him what to do, he did it! When God changed Joseph's plans with the pregnancy, Joseph attempted a new plan, but God intervened and called for a course correction. So in one sense, Joseph's plans did not change. In obedience to the Lord, he kept with the initial plan and married Mary.

But Joseph's plans changed in other ways. Even though Mary was now fully his wife, Joseph "knew her not until she had given birth to a son." Matthew wanted the truth of Jesus' virgin birth to be very clear. Joseph would be bringing up someone else's son—God's Son!—as his own.

Worth noting in verse 25 is the word *until*. The word indicates their marriage relationship was completely normal. Mary and Joseph enjoyed normal marital relations after the birth of Jesus. This understanding is different from those that teach the unbiblical notion of the perpetual virginity of Mary. Matthew's Gospel tells us Jesus had at least four brothers named James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas, as well as an unknown number of sisters. (See 13:55-56.)

Even though God altered Joseph's plans dramatically, he obeyed faithfully. He played a key role in the Messiah's birth and early years. Joseph shows us the value of obeying God and doing so quickly!

When have you seen someone trust God even when it didn't make sense?

QUESTION #4

What are some practical ways we can follow Joseph's example of obedience?

QUESTION #5

LIVE IT OUT

How will you seek to emulate Joseph's faithful example this week? Consider these three suggestions:

- ▶ **Adjust your thinking.** Maybe you have a perspective on something that is out of sync with God's point of view. What would it take to align yourself with God's perspective? Pray and ask God to help you see life from His perspective.
- ▶ **Adjust your trust.** A key component to adjusting your life to God's plan involves trust in God's sovereignty. Review the different areas of your life and identify the ways you should fully trust God in each of those areas.
- ▶ **Adjust your obedience.** The essence of trust is obedience. If you trust who God is, it is only natural to do what He says. What is a specific area in your life where you need to obey God this week?



We may not always like change. But when change comes our way, it's good to know we have a God who is big enough to see us through and One who can align our hearts to His.

My thoughts