



*The Wonder
of the
Nativity*

*Reclaiming the Christmas Season
an Advent devotional*

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Matthew 1:18-25 (NIV) "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. 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.

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

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel --which means, 'God with us.'

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus."



This first week of Advent provides thoughtful consideration of the *hope* and *promise* inherent in the birth of Christ. Fully God and fully man, Jesus accepted the ultimate vulnerability--a human baby, born to humiliated parents, into a world that would eventually reject him. Our world hates this message and fights against its reality. What we have, what we see, what we know, is all *temporary*. The more we begin to see ourselves in light of this reality, the more we will be able to find *hope* in the journey because we know that it will lead us home. John Piper once said, "If you don't feel strong desires for the manifestation of the glory of God, it is not because you have drunk deeply and are satisfied. It is because you have nibbled so long at the table of the world. Your soul is stuffed with small things, and there is no room for the great." Mary and Joseph clearly embraced this concept. What mattered most to them was that God's glory was paramount. Their hope was in the promise of Jesus, in their unborn (and unseen) child. Sometimes the greatest promises come from the greatest ironies, but it is true (Matt. 20:16, 2 Cor. 12:10, Matt. 5:5, Matt. 18:3)! And so, we must rest in the *hope* that is in the *promise* of Jesus Christ: the reconciliation of our hearts to the presence of God.

We don't know much about the stories of Mary and Joseph as individuals, but what we do know is inspirational. Here we have (likely) two teenagers engaged to be married. Mary has a vision from an angel informing her that she will conceive a child from the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:26-38). Though she was "greatly troubled," we know she responded with humble obedience, offering herself as a servant of the Lord. Of course, she had questions--like "uhh this is not how babies are made??" The angel assured her that *nothing is impossible with God. What a promise.*

After Joseph discovered Mary was with child, he pondered his legal rights to divorce her. What shame must have been weighing on him during those early hours after discovering this! But Joseph received a vision giving him a promise that this child is the Son of God. Joseph was encouraged to put his fears aside and take Mary as his wife. He obeyed. Joseph sacrificed his legal rights, his marital rights, perhaps his standing in the community, all in the name of Jesus and the hope that He brings. *This is the role of husband.* The leader of the home, defender of marriage, protector of the vulnerable, obedient servant, and faithful lover.

Mary and Joseph embraced their role in God's plan. Their selflessness allowed them to honor and love each other with servant-like, sacrificial love. Their love was a foreshadowing of Christ's love for us! Our love for our spouses is designed to a reflection of Christ's love, a love like Mary and Joseph. The *hope* that God will use our marriage, and all its challenges, to complete His work in us and others is rich with excitement and *promise*.

The announcement of Jesus' birth came at a time of great darkness and longing for the people of Israel. They had not heard from God through any prophet for hundreds of years. Grief abounded. And yet, they held out *hope* that God would come through. And while it was not as expected, it was exactly what the world needed, at a time when they needed it most. Friends, the night is always darkest before the dawn. Take heart this season, take time to encourage those around you, rest in the hope that transcends circumstances and in the promise of our God, the all-knowing, all-powerful, merciful, and just Father.



Mary's submission

Romans 15:13 (NIV) "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope."

Mary's role in this Nativity story is prominently talked about. We know that she had great faith and is known as a servant of the Lord. But how we wish Scripture shared that first conversation between Mary and Joseph with us. What an opportunity to see how to handle anxiety and conflict! Here is what we do know: Mary first submitted herself to the will of the Lord. She didn't first get the okay from her fiancé or from her family. She placed God above her relationship with her spouse. She sacrificed her reputation, her body, her ideal wedding day, etc. She was even willing to sacrifice her impending marriage and secure future! All for the will of God. Her faith in God provided her joy and peace, giving her that foundation of hope that, we are certain, had to carry her through those nine months of anticipation. Second, she submitted to Joseph. She had to have told him the truth, or else he wouldn't think to divorce her, right? In being vulnerable, she was choosing to place herself under his mercy. In this time, men had legal rights, whereas women did not. She had to have been anxious about that conversation, yet she was obedient to the Lord.

Mary saw herself not at the center of the story, the heroine, but on the periphery, ready to be an instrument for God's holy purposes. No matter what that meant for her and her unborn child. She was surely judged for her premarital pregnancy, forced to travel while she was pregnant (on foot through the desert), and uprooted from her home when Jesus was still a small boy. Through it all, she kept her eyes on God (not on herself, and not on her new husband). She abounded in *hope* because she trusted her life to the *God of hope*.

Discuss

This Christmas season (and beyond!), how do we reflect the character of Mary's submission in our marriage, to one another? As a couple, discuss what this story says about the character of God, the design of marriage, and what you want to do about it.

Pray

Together, pray that joy and peace will abound as you follow the Lord's plan. Pray that His plan will be made complete in you, as individuals and as a couple. Pray that God will provide you opportunities to share about the hope that comes from the power of the Holy Spirit.



Josephs submission

1 John 3:16 (NIV) "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters."

Sometimes it's hard to grasp his story in light of our 21st century lenses--after all, divorce is rather common, as is adultery. We see our right to happiness as alpha to any conversation about commitment. So, for a moment, try putting on Joseph's 1st century glasses. If Joseph were to wed Mary, in spite of her pregnancy, he would be bringing enduring reproach on his entire household. Essentially, he would be embracing this woman's perceived actions, sending a message of acceptance. But Joseph clearly cared for this woman, so he came up with a good idea. One that would save his reputation and save Mary from open shame. But God had a better way. Joseph sacrificed his merciful plan for God's complete plan. He welcomed his role in the Nativity with perfect submission to the rights of God.

As we look to Joseph's example, let's remember today that *God is calling us to greater things*. We may not be able to see it in the moment, we may even have a pretty good plan. But if we can surrender with the kind of trust that Joseph had in God, we will be able to look ahead to our ultimate goals--eternity with Jesus! Heaven is our goal friends! Let's not forget this! Sacrificing our own desires and expectations for the higher calling of God is the whole point of the Gospel. The whole point of Christmas.

Discuss

Self-sacrifice and mutual sanctification are such beautiful parts of the marriage relationship. We are called to encourage these things in our spouses (not hold it over their heads). Share how you see these qualities of Joseph in one another. As a couple, discuss what this story says about the character of God, the design of marriage, and what you want to do about it.

Pray

Together, pray that love will abound in your marriage. Love that is sacrificial, selfless, and fun! Pray that God will give you opportunities to serve one another this Christmas season.



Grief in a Joyful Season

Psalm 30:11 (NIV) "You have turned for me my mourning into dancing; you have loosed my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness..."

While the holidays bring joy and fond memories for many, for others, they are a reminder of what has been lost or broken. Grief becomes the overwhelming theme of the season, as former beloved traditions and celebrations now seem tainted or dull. They have lost their meaning. Whether you are experiencing sadness over past events, or are currently living through a trial, there is hope! Christmas is not just one of joyful gift giving and merriment--it is THE season that represents the greatest hope and comfort known to humankind. This is why we sing "Oh tidings of comfort and joy"!

We are certain Mary and Joseph experienced differing levels of grief throughout their journey to childbirth. As they experienced life's trials, they were likely weary and maybe even a little hopeless at times (they weren't perfect, after all). But what is hope in Christ? It is the recall of (and gratitude for) God's goodness to us in the past and anticipation of His goodness to us in the future, however bleak the present. This does not mean we ignore or minimize our pain, rather it means God is good all the time. Let us say it again. God is good all the time. This truth will help you rest in the provision of God in your past and the *promise of provision in the future*. This *hope* is precisely what gives a weary world good reason to rejoice.

Discuss

Share your feelings about this season with each other, and be willing to be vulnerable. Is this a time to rejoice together, or a time to lean on one another for comfort? How will this shape your celebration of this season? As a couple, discuss what this story says about the character of God, the design of marriage, and what you want to do about it.

Pray

Together, pray that God would help you to trust one another with your true feelings, fears, stressors, and hopes. Pray that God would give you strength to be emotionally, spiritually, and physically available to one another this season, and to others as He leads you.



The Blessing of Waiting

Psalm 130:5-8 (NIV) "I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning. O Israel,

put your hope in the Lord, for with the Lord is unfailing love and with him is full redemption. He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins."

2 Peter 3:8 (NIV) "But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day."

Waiting often implies impatience. Especially in a culture driven by busyness and deadlines and schedules, we hate waiting. As a culture, we crave immediate gratification and instant happiness. We see immediately the favor of our friends with the notification of every like. As a result, we have lost the art (and maybe the ability) just to be still. We are commanded to "be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46). Patience is a fruit of the Spirit, but it is often downplayed and minimized. We attribute it to our personality or ambitious drive. But the Bible speaks extensively on the virtue and commendability of patience in the lives of many. It is possible that none of these historical characters started out with exemplary patience, but they likely abounded with it through the sanctification of God.

This is our hope. The process of sanctification is not usually pleasant, often equated to the hot fires of a goldsmith. Many in Scripture had to wait a long time, some for decades, for God to fulfill His promises. But *God's plan is always perfect*. This is the promise that Mary and Joseph clung to as they endured the trials that came with Jesus' birth. It anchored their souls to give them strength and courage to trust in the goodness of God. And if our goal is to embrace His plan, then it is time to embrace the wait.

Discuss

How do you each deal with waiting? How have you seen this idea of cultural impatience manifested in your own lives? In your relationship? As a couple, discuss what this story says about the character of God, the design of marriage, and what you want to do about it.

Pray

Together, pray for patience and faithfulness in waiting - be specific in praying about what is going on right now in your lives. Pray for God to give each of you an eager anticipation to see His next move and to place all of your hope in Him.



Do Not Be Afraid

Deuteronomy 31:8 (NIV) "The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged."

A light shining in the darkness is one of those widely used metaphors across Scripture. Its stark contrast provides a context when attempting to understand the holiness of God. When a light is suddenly turned on in a dark room, our eyes are accosted by it and we try to block it out. It takes time to adjust, but when we do we are grateful for the light and for all that we can see by it. To behold something is like this in some ways. To be struck by something, unable to comprehend it fully, fearful of the pain it may cause, but then to slowly find yourself in awe and wonder at what is before you.

Mary and Joseph each received the command "do not be afraid" as they were given the promises of Jesus' birth. Imagine how anxiety provoking it would be to behold an angel, standing in front of you. Or experience a dream with vivid instructions from the Holy Spirit. They each chose to behold the word of God, humbly receive it, and embrace its path for them. God promises to us that He will never leave us or forsake us. He is here, always.

So, as you behold the Christmas message this season, we hope you are moved by the greatness of it. We pray earnestly that your heart will be able to receive and comprehend the wonder and glory of the Christ child. Let yourself be confronted by the Light of Jesus--the wonder of the Gospel begins with the Christmas miracle of Christ's immaculate conception and virgin birth. There is so much for our human hearts to fear here, and perhaps that is exactly why God gave, and still gives, the command: *do not be afraid. When we allow it, His perfect love casts out all fear.*

Discuss

Have you ever been afraid of what God may have in store for you? How have you dealt with this - individually and as a couple? How would you like to address those fears in the future, in light of Mary and Joseph's example? What might this look like practically in your lives? As a couple, discuss what this story says about the character of God, the design of marriage, and what you want to do about it.

Pray

Together, pray that the love of God would ravish your hearts, transform your lives, renew your wonder of the Savior born *for us, and cast out any lingering fear of His perfect plans for you as a united team. Pray that your marriage would be a reflection of this perfect love that the world might see and experience wonder as well.*



Ordinary Life, Extraordinary Joy

Ecclesiastes 5:18-20 (NIV) "This is what I have observed to be good; that it is appropriate for a person to eat, to drink and to find satisfaction in their toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given them--for this is their lot. Moreover, when God gives someone wealth

and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil--this is a gift of God. They seldom reflect on the days of their life, because God keeps them occupied with gladness of heart."

It is God who enables us to have grateful hearts, and to find enjoyment in the ordinary moments of our lives. When we ask God for the ability to accept our lot, to be grateful for and content with what we have been given, then we are no longer shackled to the shame of our past. It is forgiven! We no longer have to be bound by worry about the future. He's got it covered! We can choose to wallow in shame or drown in worry, even though both are useless and only steal joy from the present. Or we can choose to go through life with a song in our hearts, knowing that joy can be found *now*, even in the most mundane of circumstances.

There were definitely many things Mary and Joseph could have complained about on that night Jesus was born. Can you imagine yourself (or your wife) laboring and giving birth on a pile of straw, surrounded by farm animals, far away from anything or anyone familiar? Not an ideal birth plan by any stretch of the imagination. While Mary likely acknowledged her less than ideal circumstances (hard to miss it!), we have to believe that at the end of the day she was far more likely to be overwhelmed by the reality that she was holding the Savior of the world in her arms, rather than the reality that cow manure abounded and privacy was nonexistent. Perhaps she was overwhelmed at the "thrill of hope" as she took it all in, the fulfillment of the angel's promise. God placed extraordinary in the ordinary on Christmas morning, and that is where we will find our satisfaction. The extraordinary is all around us - we just have to have eyes to see it. This year, let's chase after Jesus and expect to find the deepest joy we have ever experienced, no matter what the new year brings.

Discuss

Think of a time in your lives that felt mundane or ordinary, a time when you could relate to the author of Ecclesiastes. How would you describe that time, and how did you manage any feelings of restlessness or disappointment or frustration? Do you find yourself living more in the past, present, or future - and how has this affected your marriage? As a couple, discuss what this story says about the character of God, the design of marriage, and what you want to do about it.

Pray

Together, pray that God would help you both to rest in the present, to experience the deep and abiding joy that only exists right here and right now. Pray that he would give you eyes to see the extraordinary in your everyday lives and that He would give you grateful hearts to experience true contentment.



Ultimate Hope in Jesus

2 Corinthians 4:17-18 (NIV) "For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."

Psalms 121:1-2 (ESV) "I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth."

If we're really honest with ourselves, we would likely admit that often we find our hope in many things - job security, family, money, kids, marriage. The problem is, all of those things are momentary in light of the bigger picture of eternity. Francis Chan once wrote, "People accuse me of going overboard in preparing for my first ten million years in eternity. In my opinion, people go overboard in worrying about their last ten years on earth." This is not our home! And we would be wise to begin putting more of our energy into preparing for eternity, rather than worrying about whatever temporal event or circumstance may pop up next in our fleeting lives here on earth. Sound harsh? Again, not when we are able to see the world, and our lives, through God's eyes. We are like flowers, flourishing one day and blown away by the wind the next (Psalm 103:15-16). Does this mean we are insignificant? By no means! It's simply a matter of perspective - when God is at the center of our lives, then we are able to trust *His plan for His glory*. It's the only thing that makes sense.

Mary's reality, her attitude, her perspective was forever changed by the One who makes all things new, who promises freedom and eternal life for all who trust in Him, who has the power to turn the ordinary into the extraordinary simply by His presence. This can be true for us as well. The key is to seek not joy, but the One who provides true joy. We must see ourselves as heavenly citizens and seek wisdom from above so that we never lose sight of why we are here and for Whom we are living. We are not our own. Love came down, in a tiny and humble bundle of joy, and paid the price for us. He alone satisfies, and with Him nothing is impossible. The wonder of the Gospel begins with the Christmas miracle of Christ's conception and birth. This is not something we outgrow or become used to. Today, take time to *behold* the Light of the world, the Redeemer of our pasts and the Hope of our futures.

Discuss

How often are you able to see yourself as a true foreigner here on earth? How often do you contemplate your first 10 million years in eternity? What is that like for you and how does it shape your attitude, your goals, your priorities? As a couple, discuss what this story says about the character of God, the design of marriage, and what you want to do about it.

Pray

Together, pray that God would give you wisdom in contemplating your heavenly citizenship and how this shapes your daily life here on earth. Pray that your perspective would constantly be shaped and renewed by the presence of Jesus.